

GOOD
DAME
FORTUNE



MARIA A
HOYER

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GOOD DAME FORTUNE

BY

MARIA A. HOYER

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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PART I.



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GOOD DAME FORTUNE.

CHAPTER I.

‘ You have heard of poor Mortlake’s death, I suppose ?’

Mr. Johnson looked up from his evening-paper at his neighbour Alcot, who had just entered the railway-carriage, and who addressed the above words to him.

‘ No,’ he answered. ‘ I have been away from home for a fortnight. Is Mortlake

dead? It must have been very sudden, then, for I saw him the day before I left, and he seemed much as usual then.'

'Yes, it was very sudden. Found dead in his bed. And there is no will, and likely to be no end of a bother with the property. Curious how some men go on year after year, and never make their wills; business men, too, who must be aware how much confusion and trouble it causes.'

'Probably they reflect that the trouble won't affect them.'

'Ah! I don't know. Few men realise a world without themselves to manage it! It is difficult to sink one's identity so completely. Besides, if men have gained their money by their own exertions, as Mortlake has done, they generally feel suffi-

cient affection for it to desire to settle its future destination, and not leave it loose upon the world for anyone to play ducks and drakes with. To my mind, it betrays a weak link in a man's courage. He does not like to face the thought of death.'

Just then the train stopped at another station; strangers got into the carriage, and the conversation stopped.

Mr. Johnson went home to his solitary dinner, and then betook himself to his library, where he usually spent the evening. It was a still, grey evening towards the end of May, warm for the time of year, and the writing-table that stood all the winter by the fire was now wheeled into the bay-window, which was wide open to the garden. He sat down in his easy-chair, but did not take up the book which

lay on the table, open at the page where he had left it in the morning, nor did he notice the fresh package that had come during the day from the bookseller. He half turned his chair from the table, and, leaning his grey head against its leathern back, looked thoughtfully out into the garden.

All was very still, save for the piping of a thrush from the elm-trees at the end of the lawn ; soft bars of grey cloud veiled the pallid sky, a faint mist was gathering round the shrubs, and deepening the shadows under the trees, now in all their fresh glory of foliage, while the level blossoms of the hawthorn and the white spires of lilac glimmered in the twilight, and the scent of the flowering shrubs filled the air.

with a faint perfume. Now and then a bat wheeled suddenly past in ghost-like silence. It was one of those evenings when the stillness makes you listen, you scarcely know for what—unless it be for the shadowy footsteps of coming events—and the future becomes audible to the mind.

But Mr. Johnson was not thinking thus as he gazed across the lawn. His mind was dwelling with a strange persistency on the words his neighbour had spoken in the train, ‘If men have gained their money by their own efforts, they generally feel too much affection for it to leave it loose upon the world for anyone to play ducks and drakes with;’ and then the hint about cowardice. Alcot was a shrewd man and a lawyer—he saw a good deal of human

nature, as lawyers must do—was what he said true? and, if true, how did he stand himself?

‘I have not made my will!’ murmured Mr. Johnson. ‘Am I a coward, I wonder!’

It is a sad fact that whenever we catch a glimpse of ourselves through other people’s eyes, we generally receive a shock, and probably if, for once, we could meet ourselves walking down the street in our ordinary manner we might find some difficulty in recognition. And it caused a slight mental wince to Mr. Johnson as he reflected that if he died some such disparaging words would be applied to him as had been spoken about poor Mortlake. He—William Johnson—had gained his fortune—and it amounted to no mean sum—by his own exertions,

and he too had not made his will. Should he die suddenly, all those accumulated thousands would be left loose upon the world.

But why should he care? He had neither brother nor sister, neither wife nor child—a solitary old man with no one belonging to him. He was not a coward. It was not the fear of death, or the weak superstition that such an act as will-making would hasten his decease that had deterred him from the act. No, it was no such contemptible feeling as that, but a half-indolent dislike to the trouble it would cause him. That trouble could be gathered up and expressed in one short sentence: ‘Whom should he make his heir?’

As he thought of this he sighed, and

passed his hand wearily over his head, ruffling up his thick, short, iron-grey hair. A sudden depressing sense of loneliness, of isolation from his kind filled his mind. As far as he knew, he was quite alone in the world, unconnected by any tie of blood or kindred to any human creature, and thus had no natural heir for the money which he had been at such pains to accumulate. His only brother had died when quite a lad, and he never remembered his mother speaking of any relations. Indeed, as she had been an only child, probably she had none. His father had died when he was about ten years old, and his mother twenty years later. Since then he had lived alone, absorbed in his own pursuits and interests. Success, as far as money-matters are concerned, had come to him

tolerably early in life, and now he had in great measure withdrawn from business affairs with a considerable fortune, and had been enabled to gratify the desire for travel and study which the narrow means and limited leisure of earlier years had forbidden.

He had never married. When he had been quite a young man, the head of the firm wherein he had been employed as a clerk, pleased with the intelligence and industry of the young fellow, had invited him down to his country house for a few days, and had thus given the young, suburban, ill-educated lad a glimpse into a world of culture and refinement of which he had never dreamed. The daughter of the house, a beautiful and clever girl, had been kind to the shy, awkward youth,

and, in return, poor William Johnson had fallen hopelessly in love—yet not exactly in love, but into a sort of rapture and worship as of some saint or angel. That visit was a crisis in his life. It was more—it was a revelation of a new world, and a new world that it might be possible for him to enter. It awakened in him instincts, longings, desires, aspirations that he had never possessed before. He began to cultivate himself, to read, to study, to train his mind, with some wild, vague hope that he might distinguish himself in some unknown way, so as to be worthy in some slight measure of the regard of such a woman as his master's daughter. His dream, as far as she was concerned, had come to an abrupt awakening, when he heard one day of her marriage to a dis-

tinguished man of letters ; but it had lasted long enough to give a distinct bent to his mind, and his love of literature and art were established. But another effect upon him, perhaps less to be desired, was that that vision of perfect womanhood had made it impossible for him to decline to any lesser standard, and there had been no second love for him. He travelled, he collected pictures and books, he took helpful interest in many good works, but love was over for him.

So the years had passed on, and he had been well content ; but now, suddenly, these few chance words had suggested the question—with that chilling sense of the brevity of mortal hold—what should he do with all this wealth that he had accumulated ?

He was nearly fifty years of age, and soon, strangely soon, he must start on that journey whereon all baggage is strictly forbidden. Supposing that he should die without a will, who would have it all—all the investments over which he watched with careful eyes, all the fine pictures that hung on his walls, all the still more beloved books that filled the bookcases and shelves that lined the room in which he sat? A half sad, half amused little laugh broke from his lips, as he reflected that he did not in the least know.

‘It is odd,’ he said, half aloud, ‘it really is very odd. Surely I must have some relations somewhere. My father was a countryman, by-the-way. He came from Bembury in Southshire. Why, now I

think of it, I remember once our going there when I was quite a little chap, with father, and mother, and poor George ; I can remember the feel of the country air, and the big arch of the sky. There was a mill, I remember, and a great water-wheel in a dark place which used to frighten me, and the water used to foam away under the bridge. I recollect an old man, also, who patted my head and gave me a great piece of ginger-bread. I wonder where father's old desk is?—perhaps there may be something there that may throw light on my family. Not much of a pedigree, I daresay, but I think I am tired of being alone in the world.'

As he was about to rise in search of the old desk, a knock came at the door, and his old housekeeper entered, bringing his

evening cup of tea. She was a woman verging on seventy years of age, who had first entered his mother's service as little nursemaid when he had been a baby, and had cleaved to the family through good and evil all these years. Now she was housekeeper, and ruled his establishment with a despotic, beneficent rule. He always called her Eleanor, though to everyone else she was 'Mrs. Brown,' having assumed the title of mistress as more dignified, though with some want of logic she always 'blessed her stars' that she had never 'demeaned' herself by matrimony. To her, he in return was 'Mr. William,' the only being left who called him by his Christian name.

As she entered, it flashed upon his mind that possibly this old servant might

be able to give him some information on the subject which he had in his mind. She had been so many years in his and his mother's service, and had been grown up in the days when he was a child, and when, if there had been any intercourse with those dimly-recollected relatives, it must have taken place.

‘Eleanor,’ he said, as she put the dainty tea-tray on a table by his side, ‘do you recollect my father ever speaking of any relations he had in the country?’

The old woman looked surprised at the question. She did not answer for a minute or two, but stood as if reflecting.

‘Well, Mr. William,’ she said at last, ‘I do. He talked of ’em sometimes, and once we all went down to see ’em.’

‘Did we!’ he said, turning to her with

strong interest. 'I have a vague recollection of our being away in the country, but I was too young to remember anything definitely.'

'Of course you were, sir,' she replied. 'You were but a bit of a child, five or six years old. But I mind it well. I had never been in the real country before, and it was a rare treat for me. There was your grand-uncle, quite an old gentleman, at the mill, and your Uncle Edward—he that had the property afterwards. Your blessed mother, sir, was always rather sore about that—she thought the old gentleman might have remembered his eldest nephew, and left him something—or his children rather, for your poor father was dead then.'

‘ Uncle Edward. I wonder if he is still alive—was he married then?’

‘ No, sir, he hadn’t any wife then. Whether he ever did marry, I can’t say—no more than if he be still living. He were a surly sort of young man, and seemed to have a sort of grudge agin your father and mother. He lived with the old gentleman, and managed the mill for him—leastways, he did a good deal, though old Mr. Johnson liked to keep hold too!’

‘ And you say that he had the property?’

‘ Yes, Mr. William, I mind well one morning your mother saying as how she had heard the old man was gone, that was after your dear papa died, sir, for she hoped for a little legacy, I know. You

was still at school then, and it wasn't always easy for her to get along.'

'No, no!' said Mr. Johnson, sadly. 'My poor mother. I wish—I wish, Eleanor, she had lived a little longer till I could have made her more comfortable. Poor mother, hers was a hard life!'

'She lived to see you in a fair way to succeed, sir,' answered the old woman, brushing her hand over her eyes. 'You were always a good son, Mr. William!'

'I might have been a better, I fear,' he said, sadly. 'There are always some recollections that sting. But you were a good friend to her, Eleanor,' he went on, taking the old woman's wrinkled hand in his as he spoke, 'and to me, too. I am grateful, I assure you.'

The old woman smiled as she pressed

her master's hand, and was about to quit the room when he detained her.

‘Stay a minute, Eleanor,’ he said. ‘I am thinking of going down to Bembury and looking up the old folks. I may have a lot of cousins there, for aught I know.’

‘I should say not, sir,’ answered Eleanor, quietly.

‘Why not? What makes you say that?’

‘Well, sir—when there's a lot of young people to get out in the world, it's wonderful how it jogs folks' memories about their kith and kin. You would have seen some of them cousins before now, Mr. William, if they were there!’

Mr. Johnson laughed.

‘Perhaps that's true,’ he said. ‘Well, Eleanor, at any rate I will go and look them up—or at least, see if any are left.’

Will you have my valise packed? I think I'll go down to-morrow.'

The old woman trotted away to see the order fulfilled, and then Mr. Johnson unlocked a cupboard, and searched about for the old desk. At last he found it, but then he had another hunt before he could find the key with which to open it.

It was full of papers neatly tied up in little bundles by his mother's careful fingers. They were chiefly letters. About them hung that faint, musty smell that clings to such documents, a sort of odour of death and decay—faint speech of the past to the present. Perhaps there is nothing more sad and pathetic in this sad, mysterious human life of ours, than to read old letters, when the hands that wrote them are crumbled to dust, and all the loves,

and hopes, and joys, fears and sorrows faded away and over. Those who wrote them were so full of life and hope—all was so important, so interesting; they were breathless and eager with the tragedy and comedy of life—and now it is all over, and it sounds in our ears as the faint thin echo of some dying song. It was so real to them—it is just a ‘tale that is told’ to us!

Some such thoughts filled Mr. Johnson’s mind as he handled those packets, untying and unfolding some and glancing over them. There were letters from his father to his mother, and *vice-versâ*. There were one or two from his grandfather, John Johnson, to his father, Thomas Johnson. His grandfather appeared to rent a farm which was not answering very well. There

were allusions in them to another Thomas Johnson—his grandfather's brother who had the mill. Then there was another letter telling of the death of this grandfather, whose affairs seemed in a bad state, and one of a little later date of the death of his wife. These were written by an Edward Johnson.

‘That must be my Uncle Edward, my father's brother,’ mused Mr. Johnson. ‘Ah, here is another one in the same handwriting.’

It ran as follows :

‘ Highcote Mill,

‘ July 15, 1860.

‘ MY DEAR SISTER,

‘ This is to inform you of the lamented death of my uncle, Thomas Johnson, which sad event took place with

some suddenness on the night of the ninth of this month. He had been ailing for some time, but none contemplated danger. He was buried yesterday by the side of my honoured father in Bembury churchyard, and was followed to the grave by the regrets of all who knew him. The Rev. Mr. Bolington, rector of the parish, read the service. After the sad ceremony, the will was opened by Mr. Jacks the lawyer, and I found to my great surprise that my lamented uncle had left his property, consisting of the freehold of Highcote Mill, house, stables, etc., and also some money in the funds, to me as his sole heir. The will was dated ten years previously, when, as you will remember, your late husband was not on very friendly terms with his uncle. I assure you my

astonishment at hearing of my inheritance was great, and I must humbly hope to be preserved from pride, and enabled by Providence to make a good use of the property so unexpectedly bestowed on me.

‘ I remain, dear sister,

‘ Your affectionate brother,

‘ EDWARD JOHNSON.

‘ P.S.—I hope my nephew William is working well at school, and will soon be advanced enough in his learning to seek a position where he may gain his own livelihood, and be no longer a burden on his mother’s slender means.’

Mr. Johnson read this letter twice through, and then leaned back in his chair, a flicker of a smile touching his lips.

‘Copied chiefly from a polite Letter Writer, I should say,’ he murmured to himself. ‘My dear Uncle Edward, I am forced to believe that you are, or were, a bit of a humbug. Shall I be a welcome visitor, I wonder, or the reverse. Certainly I should have been the latter, were I going to solicit help of any kind. However, time will prove.’

He folded up the letters with a sigh, put them back in the desk, and restored it to its accustomed place. Then he sought for a Bradshaw, and found that a train left Victoria for Bembury at 10.40.

‘That will do nicely,’ he said to himself, as he put away the time-table, and turned to his book which he had so long neglected. It was a Homer. Homer with notes, through which he was industriously work-

ing. He had never ceased trying to supplement that very imperfect education which his uncle had expected to be so advanced at eleven years of age.

CHAPTER II.

‘It is our first summer day,’ said Miss Leonard. ‘Didn’t you find it very hot walking up this afternoon, Molly?’

‘No, not very,’ answered the girl. ‘There is a lovely breeze, and I came up Lady Betty’s Avenue, and so had shade all the way. But it is delicious in here!’

It was a pleasant room, the ‘summer parlour,’ as it was called. A long, low-ceilinged room with a mullioned window on one side, and at the end a glass door

opening on to a bit of flower-garden, beyond which lay the orchard, where the sunlight fell among the grey stems, dappling the grass beneath with a swaying lace-work pattern of light and shade. At one side the eye caught the gleam of water, and a glimpse of fields, now all one sweep of golden buttercups, fenced with the massive grace of great elm-trees.

‘Shall I begin?’ went on the girl, taking up a book off the table. ‘Are you ready?’

‘I am quite ready, if you are,’ answered the elder lady, ‘but I think you had better rest a minute or two after your walk. And how is your mother?’

‘Oh, I think she is pretty well!’

‘I thought she was worrying about Ralph rather. You have not heard from him lately, have you?’

A sort of shadow fell over the girl's face.

‘No,’ she answered, slowly, ‘no—but—but I think no news is good news. There is one comfort about Ralph—at least, if one may term it a comfort—one always knows the worst. When he is in a scrape he always tells us.’

‘And expects you to extricate him?’

‘Yes,’ sighed the girl. ‘Poor Ralph!’

Miss Leonard made a slight murmur of dissent at the term of pity, the tone of pity the girl used.

‘I think it is you and your mother who are to be sympathised with,’ she said, sadly, ‘but I hope you are right, and that he is doing better. Well, dear, begin if you are rested.’

She settled herself as she spoke back in her low chair, and took up her knitting

while her companion began reading aloud. The book was one of Mrs. Oliphant's delightful novels, and soon both reader and listener were absorbed, so much so as to experience no slight sense of annoyance when Jones, the old man-servant, came in and interrupted them.

‘Please, miss,’ said the old man, addressing the elder lady—‘there is a gentleman called, and he wants to know if he may draw the house!’

‘Draw the house!’ exclaimed Miss Leonard, in a rather astonished voice. ‘What do you mean, Jones? Is that his card you have there?’

‘Yes, miss;’ and Jones stepped across the room. ‘He says you don’t know him!’

Miss Leonard looked at the card. ‘Maurice Driver’ she read aloud. ‘Who

in the world is Maurice Driver, Molly, and what does he want ?’

‘ Perhaps it is somebody who wants to sketch the house,’ suggested Molly. ‘ He may be an artist. Hadn’t you better see him ?’

‘ Yes, miss ;’ said Jones, grasping the idea with a sudden joy. ‘ I do believe Miss Molly is right, for he have one of them little stools with him as I’ve seen ’em a-squatting on. Shall I ask him to come in and speak to you, miss ?’

‘ Stay a moment. Is he a gentleman, Jones ?’

‘ Oh yes, miss,’ replied Jones, with the confident discrimination of a well-trained servant, ‘ there ain’t no doubt of that !’

Miss Leonard agreed to an interview, and in a minute more Mr. Maurice Driver was

shown in. He was a tall, good-looking young fellow, with auburn hair and moustache, hazel brown eyes, quick with observation, and a very delicate complexion. The thin cheeks had a flush of pink in them, almost girl-like, and contrasting rather oddly with the bold aquiline features. His hands were brown as if with exposure to the sun, but were remarkably well formed, with a flexible, nervous, energetic look in the long fingers. An attractive personality, Miss Leonard decided, and at once granted his request, which, as Molly had divined, was that he might sketch the house.

‘ I caught sight of the gables of the roof from the high-road,’ he explained, ‘ and tried to get a view without intruding upon you, but the foliage is so thick, and more-

over, the more I saw, the more I wanted to see. It appears to be a most interesting old house, both inside and out, and he glanced round the pretty old room with an approving look—a look, too, which quite comprehended the very pretty girl in the white dress, sitting there with the open book on her lap.

‘It was originally an old religious foundation,’ said Miss Leonard, pleased with the interest displayed. ‘Some time, if you like, you can go over it. The greater part of the present house dates from the time of James the First, but there are relics of former work.’

‘Thank you exceedingly,’ said the young man, a gleam of sincere pleasure lighting up his face. ‘I shall be only too delighted, but if I may get the sketch now—the

light is just perfect,' he added, half apologetically.

Miss Leonard smiled.

'Oh! certainly,' she replied. 'Pray go where you like—you can see the inside any time!'

Miss Leonard took up her knitting again, when their visitor disappeared.

'I think I like that young man' she said, reflectively, to Molly.

'Yes,' replied the girl, with a slightly critical tone. 'Yes, he seemed passable. Shall I go on now?'

Miss Leonard gave an amused glance at her young friend. She seemed as if about to make some further remark, but checked herself, and only said, with a smile,

'Yes, please, dear!'

It certainly was very pleasant in the sum-

mer-parlour that afternoon. The soft air blew in at the open window, bringing with it the warm sweetness of the flowers, and the hum of insects, while the birds chirped and sang among the trees with that unremitting vigour which they display in early summer. Pharoah, the cat, sunned himself on the step outside the glass door, and watched with lazy, half-shut eyes the blackbirds and starlings which now and again ran across the lawn. There was a distant cluckling from the poultry-yards, and the cooing of pigeons from the dove-cote. A cow was lowing in the field, impatient for milking-time. Peaceful country sounds, which scarcely seemed to break the country quiet, and through which the girl's clear voice sounded pleasantly.

Miss Leonard went on with her knitting.

She was a handsome, aristocratic-looking, middle-aged woman. Really she was only forty years of age, though her white hair at first gave the impression of her being older, but that was only at first ; a second glance recognised the piquancy of its contrast with the delicately-arched dark eyebrows, and the smooth, unwrinkled cheek. She was the owner of Mote Court, this same old house in which she had been born, and where she had spent all her days, and which was known to antiquarians everywhere as a most interesting specimen of the style of architecture popular in the spacious times of great Elizabeth, and the early years of James. Not only antiquarians, though, but most folks with eyes in their heads who passed along the road, from which the Court was most visible, would

pause to look at it with admiration, perchance with envy. The peaked gables and twisted chimneys, the wonderful tones of bricks and tiles, the ancient trees and bright gardens, the peace, the tranquil air of comfort, all spoke of security and long years of gracious plenty. Surely no sordid troubles weighed upon those who dwelt within—no carking cares, no vexing, wearing thoughts disturbed them. Their bread was indeed certain, their water was sure, their sleep was not broken by fevered calculations for the morrow ! No, an ordered sequence of peaceful days and untroubled nights must surely wait upon them !

So it was now in truth, but so it had not always been. The house was too old not to have witnessed many a stormy scene among the humanity which had dwelt in

its shelter. Miss Leonard herself had not always looked forward to the tranquil heirship which had become hers. She had had a brother once ; but, one day, three months before he was going to be married, he had been killed by a fall from his horse. She never had been married—why she had not was one of the staple topics of country conversation. Not for want of asking, at any rate, after her brother's death—was well known ! But she had remained single, nursing devotedly her poor old father, whose health had broken down completely after his son's death, till now people had quite left off expecting her to marry, and her neighbours having made up their minds that she was to be an old maid, began, instead, to speculate as to who would be her heir ! So short is the step in

imagination between marriage and death.

But Miss Leonard kept her own counsel, and lived her own life. She went to London for a few weeks in the early spring, and she generally went abroad in the late summer. She mixed in county gaieties, and she took an earnest part in the philanthropic work of the day. She invited a few friends to shoot her pheasants in the autumn. She was an excellent landlady, and popular with her tenants. But there was a certain reserve about her that was difficult to break through. People complained that she was cold, that you never got really to know her. Oh ! yes, she was kind, most kind, and sympathetic in sorrow, but she never wanted sympathy in return ; she would not be intimate with you. And in this there was truth. Some-

thing seemed to have chilled her affections—she seemed to shut herself into herself in some inner chamber of the heart, into which recess no one was allowed to enter. And perhaps it aggrieved her lady acquaintances the more that the only intimate friend, really intimate, was one not of their own class—‘just that unfortunate little widow in Bembury, Mrs. Scobell,’ they said among themselves, ‘whose husband was a country attorney, and drank himself to death. And she is quite wrapped up in her daughter, Molly Scobell—has her continually at the Court.’ ‘I shouldn’t wonder,’ said one lady, indignantly, ‘if she left her property to her. She has no near relations—none at all, I believe, on her father’s side.’

But, though her lady neighbours discussed Miss Leonard thus in private, none dared to breathe a word of their disapproval to herself, and all had to be civil to Molly when they happened to meet her at the Court. Indeed, the girl was there most days, for Miss Leonard professed that her eyes were weak, and that she wanted a reader, and insisted on Molly receiving a liberal salary for her services in that capacity. Mrs. Scobell had been an old school-fellow of Miss Leonard's. Her father had been a physician, but he dying young had left his daughter not over well provided for, and her marriage with a young lawyer in Bembury had been an unhappy one. Miss Leonard had remained her faithful friend through all, even now, when

poor Mrs. Scobell was reduced sometimes to letting lodgings to eke out her scanty income.

At half-past four the reading was interrupted by Jones and the tea-tray. Molly put down her book. It was part of her duty to pour out tea when she was there. Miss Leonard disliked doing it if she could avoid the operation.

‘Stay a minute, Jones,’ she said, as that functionary was disappearing. ‘Is that gentleman still sketching?’

‘Yes, miss, round by the Turret Corner.’

‘I wonder,’ she went on, a little hesitatingly, ‘I wonder if he would care for some tea. What do you think, Molly?’

‘Men don’t generally!’ answered Molly, decidedly.

‘Some do,’ replied Miss Leonard, reflect-

ively. ‘There is the rector now, and Mr. Holcroft.’

‘Oh! but they are old,’ said Molly, ‘and have been married an enormous time! Young men only care for beer!’

Molly spoke with the assured decision of experience. There seemed no doubt in her mind of the universal truth of the opinion she was uttering. But just then the sound of a footstep became audible, and the stranger himself came along the path with his sketching-traps in his hand. He hesitated as he found himself close to the open door.

‘I am afraid I have taken the wrong turn,’ he said, apologetically.

‘Not at all,’ Miss Leonard answered. ‘Have you finished? Will you care for a cup of tea?’

The young fellow accepted the offer with alacrity. He stepped into the room, and then he showed his sketch to Miss Leonard.

‘That is capital!’ she exclaimed. ‘We call that Lady Betty’s Turret. But why do you not use colour?’

‘I was just going to explain to you,’ he answered, frankly, ‘and ask your permission to put this drawing to the use for which I intended it. First I must tell you that I am an architect by profession, but, as I have no doubt you are aware, the public is not very fond of young architects, and also very sceptical of their powers, and slow at employing them. I daresay they are quite wise, but, nevertheless, we want bread and cheese like other mortals, and so I supplement my

legitimate business by working for the illustrated magazines. I was commissioned to prepare an illustrated paper for the *Organ*—you know it, don't you?—and hearing Bembury was a picturesque place I came down to study it. May I use this sketch for this purpose? After your kindness in admitting me, I would not do so without your permission.'

'I do not mind at all,' said Miss Leonard, laughing. 'Only you must send me the number in which your paper appears. It will be very interesting to see the old place through other people's eyes. I have looked at it so long, and with so much prejudice in its favour, that I begin to fancy there is no other so pretty and charming.'

'There are not many,' the young fellow

replied, quickly. ‘I have been about a good deal on such expeditions as this, so I may claim to have some experience, and I have seen few to equal it, and none to surpass its own peculiar charm. Did you say it was originally a religious foundation?’

‘Yes, a Priory, but an alien one. It was suppressed about Henry the Sixth’s time. One of the old monks is said to “walk.”’

‘Ah! Of course you have a ghost.’

‘But he is not our best ghost. In that turret which you have sketched, there was a bricked-up room where a more unhappy spirit than the monk’s is likely to have been, is said to wail and weep!’

‘Was the room bricked up to keep the spirit in?’

‘Yes, she used to wander down from there to the moat-side where the tragedy took place, so they bricked her up! But a generation ago some unbeliever unbricked that room, and let the spirit loose again.’

‘Have you ever seen her?’

‘No,’ answered Miss Leonard, gravely. ‘I am not a ghost seer. I have not the peculiar sense or gift, or whatever it may be called. I suppose I am too prosaic. But others—and others whose veracity is hard to doubt—have! Would you like to see her portrait,—poor Lady Betty’s portrait, I mean?’

‘I would indeed,’ answered Maurice Driver.

Miss Leonard rose.

‘Come, Molly,’ she said to the girl, who had not spoken, and who had now taken

up some knitting. 'Come, let us show Mr. Driver the family portraits.'

All this time, Maurice had glanced now and then at Molly, and wondered who she was. He supposed she was a niece or young relative of this very pleasant old lady. She was certainly very pretty, but yet he felt annoyed with her, he scarcely knew why. She had accepted his small assistance at the tea-table with singular coldness; looked at him from time to time with a calm and critical glance, as if she were mentally appraising him body and soul, and found him rather wanting in the balance. A young man's vanity is far more irritable than a girl's, and Maurice was unaccustomed to anything like disfavour. Girls were generally glad enough to talk to him, and he was in some danger

of being spoilt by too much flattery. He felt annoyed and yet attracted by this novel experience.

Molly laid down her knitting obediently, and went with Miss Leonard into the drawing-room, which was seldom used unless there were friends staying in the house, Miss Leonard preferring the parlour in summer, and the library in winter. It was a long and rather narrow room, with several windows reaching down to the ground, and furnished with old-fashioned, stiff furniture of the spindle-legged order. The windows faced west, and the blinds were all down, producing an effect of semi-darkness, barred with lines of vivid light where, through some crevice, the westering sunlight streamed in. Molly went forward to the end win-

dow, and drew up the heavy, green, Venetian blind, letting in a flood of yellow sunshine, so that the picture on the opposite wall should be visible.

It was the full-length portrait of a girl of about two-and-twenty years of age, dressed in the costume of Charles the First's time. The colours had faded, and the drawing was somewhat stiff, but the unknown artist had caught and fixed some of the characters of an unusual face—a face that must, one felt, have a history, though yet that history had not been fulfilled. The wistful look in the eyes seemed to follow and gaze at you with a sympathy-compelling look wherever you might stand, and the expression was completed by the curved lips with the somewhat drooping corners. A beautiful face, but

one whose owner was surely doomed to sorrow and misfortune.

Maurice stood for some few minutes silently examining the picture, then he sighed involuntarily.

‘It is a sad, beautiful face,’ he said; and, as he spoke, he glanced across at Molly, who also stood looking up at the portrait, and in whose eyes, lately so cold and critical, he saw an expression of such tender pity and sympathetic feeling that he almost started. A girl who could look like that was not the icy, hard-hearted person he had imagined. ‘Will you tell me her history?’ he went on, speaking to Miss Leonard. ‘Was she an ancestress of yours?’

‘She belonged to the elder branch of our family now extinct,’ answered Miss Leon-

ard. ‘ Her name was Elizabeth, but she was generally called Betty, Lady Betty, though she had no strict right to the title, her father being only a baronet. In the Rebellion her father, Sir Digby Leonard, was on the king’s side, but Betty was engaged to an Ambrose Lawford, whose family sided with the Parliament. That led, as you may imagine, to much misery, and the girl was drawn both ways, by her love for her father and her love for her future husband. Well, one day, when the war was raging, and her father absent from home with the king’s army, there came a young fellow to Mote Court, with a note to Betty from her father, bidding her hide the bearer for the night in the secret chamber, and speed him on his way early in the morning, as he bore important de-

spatches to the Royalists in the next county, and they were much afraid of their falling into the Roundheads' hands, who were powerful all about. Indeed, it was towards the latter part of the struggle, when it was pretty evident to keen judges on which side ultimate success lay. Betty did as she was bid, but no sooner was he safe, than her lover appeared on the scene. He had gained some inkling of the arrival of the messenger, and he managed by coaxing and wheedling to get the fact from her that the messenger was there. Then he persuaded her that he was not really on the Parliament side, but obliged to pretend to be so, lest his father, who was a fanatical Puritan, should disinherit him, and that if she would let him have an interview with the stranger he could give him some im-

formation of the greatest importance to the Royalist party.

‘Do you wonder that she believed him, and entrusted him with the secret of the hidden chamber? No sooner had she done so, than at a signal a troop of Roundhead soldiers, who had been concealed outside, rushed in and seized the unfortunate Royalist.

‘Then poor Betty saw what she had done, and when, with an excess of ferocity that seems to hint at some personal motive or hatred, Ambrose Lawford commanded them to take the messenger down to a level space by the side of the moat, and shoot him as a spy, Betty followed wringing her hands, and weeping, and entreating her false lover to spare the poor lad’s life. But he refused, laughing at her anguish, and sneering and

throwing base accusations at her of faithlessness to himself. So, as the sun rose, he drew up his troop and commanded them to fire at the young Royalist, who, on his part, prayed Betty not to grieve or distress herself on his account; but, as the men discharged their firelocks, Betty rushed in between to try and shield him with her own person. It was in vain. He fell dead, shot through the heart, but she was wounded by one of the bullets. They carried her to a room in the turret which you have just sketched, and there she died, partly from the wounds, no doubt, but chiefly of a broken heart—broken by the thought of her own weakness, and her lover's treachery.'

'And what became of the false lover?'

'Oh! he rose to great wealth and honour

under Cromwell. Then later he was, as you may suppose, one of the first to welcome home Charles the Second. He died, full of years and honours, a faithful supporter of William of Orange. There is a great lumbering monument to him in Bembury Church, but no one knows where poor Lady Betty lies.'

'So there was no poetic justice?'

'No, none at all that ever I heard. That surely is the greatest of rarities.'

While the story was being related, Molly had given Miss Leonard a little meaning nod, and slipped out of the room, and Maurice did not see her again till he was on his way back to Bembury.

Then a slim, white figure crossing the bridge attracted his notice, and he followed her into the town. She stopped at an

old-fashioned, small, red-brick house near the end of the main street, and he was just in time to see the door opened by an elderly lady dressed in black, and to hear Molly say, ‘Well, mother darling;’ when the door closed again.

‘So she does not live at the Court,’ thought he. ‘I wonder who she is?’

That evening he sat down to write a letter which ran as follows :

‘White Hart Hotel, Bembury.

‘June 3rd.

‘DEAREST MOTHER,

‘Here I am fallen upon my feet again, as you say I always do. I have made the acquaintance of a charming old lady living in a charming old house, with gables and turrets outside, and family portraits and ghosts in, and

have gained permission to sketch the gables, and the ghosts if I can catch them! It is really a lovely old place. Mote Court they call it, with a garden like an idyllic poem, and part of the moat still full of water and water-lilies, and a lime-tree avenue where a poor ghost, Lady Betty—with a romance which would make you cry like a water-cart—glides up and down weeping and wringing her hands. I mean to go there every afternoon, because the light is perfect then, and it has a brooding, lotus-eating calm and charm; and besides, I shall hope for some more of the delightful tea which I had there to-day, tea nearly as good as yours, Mater, though with scarcely the perfect flavour that you manage to infuse! Also there is a younger nymph, a sort of

scornful Diana, who looks at your poor son with disdain. She rejoices in the name of Molly, which is a clear misnomer. Mollys ought all to be little, and coaxing, and roguish-eyed. No, something grand and calm, Althea or Cecilia, or Artemis would be a better title for this cold and stately damsel, who, however, does not seem to live there, though she was reading aloud one of Mrs. Oliphant's novels to my peerless old lady. I heard her as I sat at work, for the window was wide open, and she has a voice as clear as a bell and a great deal more musical.

‘To-morrow morning I am going up to sketch an old water-mill near here of which I have seen a photo. It is owned by an old party of the name of Johnson. Do you think he can be the vague relative

who haunts your brain? By the way, who do you think I saw this morning, calmly marching down the street, in a wide-awake hat, and under the shade of a silk umbrella, but our neighbour, old Mr. Johnson of Clarence Lodge. I wonder what he is doing down here? They say he is a great patron of art; perhaps, if I am in luck, he may buy a sketch, should he happen to come upon me at work!

‘An hour later—further chronicles. Diana has just gone up the street, to the post, I should think, for she had a letter in her hand. The landlord was bringing me some coffee as she passed the window, and I said to him,

“Who is that young lady?”

“That’s Miss Scobell, sir,” he answered.
“Mrs. Scobell is a widow, lives down the street—lets lodgings, sir.”

“This gave me rather a shock, but I thought he must have made a mistake.

“Is she not a relative of Miss Leonard, of Mote Court? I saw her there to-day.”

“Oh, no, sir—no relation,” said the old fellow, who looked a bit shocked. County families are evidently semi-divine down here, and to suggest that a maiden whose mother lets lodgings was related to one of them was a sort of profanity. “But Miss Leonard’s a good friend to them. I think Miss Molly goes to read to her—eyes weak, sir. In the morning she teaches Mr. Beadon’s children. Very nice young lady ;

pity her brother don't take after her!"

"“ Oh! there's a brother, is there?" I said.

"“ Yes, sir, bad lot he is—worritted his mother nigh to death when he was in Lawyer Hadley's office. Gone to London now, and a good riddance. Believe that's why the old lady has to let her rooms; he has got all the money out of her.”

‘ So you see I shall soon be in a position to write the annals of Bembury. Now I am going out for a reflective smoke—so good-bye and God bless you from

‘ Your dutiful son,

‘ MAURICE.’

When Mrs. Driver got this letter in the usual postal course, she shook her head over the part that related to the nymph.

‘ I hope she is not a minx, and just leading him on,’ she murmured. ‘ Maurice is *so* susceptible !’

CHAPTER III.

‘OH! Molly, what do you think?’ Mrs. Scobell had exclaimed to her daughter that afternoon as she let her in to the little hall. It was the same entrance that Maurice Driver had watched.

‘What is the matter?’ said Molly, a little anxiously. Surprises in that household were not generally of a pleasant nature.

‘Why, just fancy, dear! I have let the rooms! Is it not fortunate so early as this, and to such a nice old gentleman. I was

half afraid to ask the thirty shillings at this time, but I screwed up my courage, and he didn't seem to mind a bit. In fact, he said the terms were moderate for such nice rooms.'

'Who is he?' enquired Molly. They were in their own little parlour now, and Molly was laying aside her hat. Tea was on the table, for Mrs. Scoell liked to wait till her daughter came home to partake of that meal with her, the one cup Molly indulged in at Mote Court going for nothing in the little lady's eyes.

'He is quite a stranger, dear, but such a very nice, pleasant gentleman. Yes, he is, Molly; don't turn up your nose, child, like that. You think all men are bad, I know, and goodness knows you haven't much reason to think well of them; but they are

not all like—like that—no, really they are not!’

‘Very well, mother,’ said Molly, laughing. ‘I will live on faith in your assurance for the present. But where did the good old gentleman come from? Did he come straight from heaven, and has he wings under his coat?’

‘Molly, don’t be so profane. No. Briggs sent him, and I am sure it was very good of Briggs. He has been staying at the “White Hart” since yesterday, but he wants quiet rooms. He dislikes the noise of the hotel, he says, and the smell of soup and tobacco. His name is Johnson. Mr. William Johnson, and he is coming in this evening about eight. He said he would have dinner first, which was very considerate.’

‘He certainly *must* have wings!’ said Molly; ‘but will he stay long?’

‘I don’t know; he has taken the rooms for a week, but he said he should probably want them longer. But if he stays only a fortnight it will be such a help. I was wondering so however we were to pay the quarter’s rent, for I have hardly a pound left in the house, but now we shall get on!’

‘I shall have my money from Miss Leonard before then,’ answered Molly. ‘Thank goodness that is certain, and there are a nice lot of cabbages in the garden that want eating up, so we needn’t quite starve, and *perhaps* Mr. Beadon may remember to pay me my salary one of these days. He has never paid me a sixpence since Christmas. I wonder if he thinks

I teach his brats from pure pleasure and delight in the occupation? One would fancy he must, from his delay in producing any other reward for my efforts.'

Molly spoke with a laugh, but there was a little bitter sound in her voice, which made her mother gaze at her for a moment with a distressed air. Yet what could she say? She knew that Molly had always been sacrificed to circumstances. Yes, it was hard, but it had been inevitable! Ever since Mr. Scobell had departed this life—a departure which, if not to his wife, had, at least, caused much relief to his friends—leaving a handsome legacy of debts to his widow, that widow's existence had been a typical 'one. She had slaved and pinched, and scraped, to pay those debts, and then she had gone on slaving,

pinching, and scraping to give her only son Ralph a good education. Once start Ralph well—that was her theory—and he would soon make his fortune, soon repay her for all her care and self-denial! Ralph was sent to the Grammar School, and, had he chosen to work, might have gained exhibitions and scholarships, and gone to college, and covered himself with glory, and been the prop and staff of his mother's old age, as she dreamt he would be. But Ralph's tendencies had been towards other things than classics and mathematics—he had not won those scholarships, he had not gone to college. Taken into Mr. Hadley's office—Mr. Hadley was the principal solicitor of Bembury—who would have given the young man his articles out of regard for his mother, had he behaved

himself, his conduct had been such that poor Mr. Hadley, with almost tears in his eyes, had to tell Mrs. Scobell he must discharge him. Then with Miss Leonard's help a post had been procured for him in London, which Ralph loudly declared was the only place for a man—a man but wasted his time in a one-horse place like Bembury. But that, too, had been lost, and another procured only after great difficulty. Now Ralph was in a ship-broker's office, but the days on which a letter came from him were generally days of trouble and perplexity for Mrs. Scobell and Molly.

Poor Molly! Hers had been the fate of many girls. Her education had been subordinated to her brother's, that is, all the available cash had been spent on

Ralph, who would not learn, while the girl, who had both capacity and will, had been left to pick up information as she could. Fortunately Molly had the wit to grasp every opportunity that came in her way, and her mother had taught her all she knew. A French lady, staying for a while in the town, had taken a fancy to the girl, and taught her to speak French. The old curate had drilled her in Latin ‘just for love.’ Miss Leonard had lent her books. So now Molly was able to take a post as governess to Mr. Beadon’s children, and gained by that the handsome sum of twenty pounds a-year. Handsome it would have seemed in all sincerity to Molly, if it had been paid—that was the only quarrel she had with it. For poor Mrs. Secbell’s narrow means had grown narrower

and narrower as Ralph's claims for help became larger and larger, and now she was only too thankful, when she could, to let her drawing-room floor, to reinforce that yearly shrinking income.

What wonder that there was a tinge of bitterness infused into Molly's view of life. Mrs. Scobell guessed something of the feeling in her daughter's heart, and it grieved her in a vague way when she had leisure to think of it; but life was altogether too severe a struggle and tasked her energies too much for her to have much time or inclination to consider feelings. You want a dull, easy life for that, and poverty is not dull. Oh! no. Poor people have keen excitements of which the rich and well-to-do have no conception. Is there any money in the purse to

buy a loaf to-day, or must we feel the pangs of hunger? Here comes the man for the rent, and we have nothing to pay him. How long shall we sleep under a roof? How soon must the time come to shiver on a doorstep? Did not even the widow in Zarephath sometimes have a bad quarter-of-an-hour? Was her faith always equal to the strain put upon it? Did not she sometimes gaze with an anxious eye into that mysterious barrel, and feel a thrill of fear as she lifted the cruse, lest the oil should fail to well forth? No, poverty is not monotonous: it is full of fears, doubts, anxieties, tortures, that keep its victims on a rack. What time have they to think of mere mental troubles? They have got to live somehow. They have to solve much harder and more engross-

ing problems than metaphysical ones. They have to work miracles. How to make rags into decent clothing, how to satisfy hungry mouths with empty dishes, how to pay rent without coin.

What a sudden stir of excitement must have thrilled through the land of Goshen when Pharoah's command came to make bricks without straw! What exclamations, what running to and fro! How it must have broken through and cheered the daily monotony of tolerable, possible, every-day toil! To have something impossible to do, that is enlivening, in truth.

So, too, poor Mrs. Scobell had not time to deplore much her daughter's heterodox sentiments. She had to live and keep a roof over her head, and a decent gown on her back, and that quite sufficiently

tasked her energies of body and mind.

‘I have sent for Patty,’ she went on, after a meditative pause over her tea-cup, ‘and she is coming early to-morrow morning. I will wait on him to-night.’

‘No, you won’t,’ said Molly, decisively. ‘You are as tired as you can be. I know you have been dragging the bed-things about to get them aired all by yourself. I shall look after him—besides, I am curious. I can’t have you monopolise this charming stranger. Is there anything that you have left for me to do in the room?’

‘Just go and see, will you, dear?’ replied her mother. ‘Yes, the bed-room is ready; but, if you would, put a few flowers in the sitting-room. I left that because you do it so much better than I can.’

‘I will get the old punch-bowl and fill it with lilac,’ answered Molly. ‘That always looks well.’

She ran out into the garden as she spoke. It was not a very trim garden, but some attempt was made to keep it a little neat, and it looked its best now in the early summer, for there were great bushes of lilac, a hawthorn-tree one mass of level, white blossoms, and at the end a laburnum just bursting into golden rain. And presently, when she set the old blue-and-white bowl, a mass of sweetness and soft colour, in the upstairs drawing-room, it was like a gracious presence in the rather shabbily-furnished apartment, filling it with a sense of perfume and beauty.

‘I wonder if he will notice it?’ she thought to herself, bending lingeringly

over the flowers for a moment or two.

Then she had to hurry away to give a violin lesson to a little lame boy, the son of the upholsterer, who, Mrs. Scobell sometimes declared, was the only masculine creature, excepting Pluto the cat, Molly had any sympathy with. When she returned it was growing dusk, and she found their visitor had arrived. Just as she had taken off her hat, the drawing-room bell rang.

‘That is for candles,’ cried Mrs. Scobell, jumping up out of the old elbow-chair in which she had sat down to rest, ‘and some water to drink. He said he would want nothing more to-night except those when he rang.’

‘Sit still, mother,’ said Molly, authoritatively. ‘I am going to take them up.’

‘ Oh, my dear ! I don’t like you to wait on the lodgers.’

‘ And I don’t like *you* to do it. Now, be a good little mother, and sit still. You know I always will have my own way.’

Mrs. Scobell was really very thankful to sit still—she was very, very tired—but she submitted with a sigh of protest. She did really dislike the thought of her pretty, refined-looking daughter turning waitress to strangers.

‘ However, there will be Patty to-morrow,’ she reflected, as she watched Molly put the tall, old-fashioned, silver candlesticks on a tray, with a blue-and-white jug full of clear water, and a quaint, tall-stemmed glass. They were some of the remnants of better days which the poor woman had as yet been able to pre-

serve, though the candlesticks had been in peril many times. Then the girl lit the candles, and departed upstairs.

When she opened the drawing-room door she found the lodger seated at the table with a map spread out before him. He started as he saw the bearer of the candles, and sprang up with an apology on his lips. This tall girl in the white dress, with the grave, dark eyes, was very unlike the ordinary maid-servant he had expected to see. Unconsciously, Molly made a very pretty picture as she advanced to the table, the yellow light of the candles shining in the dusky twilight, and falling on the pale face crowned by the soft darkness of her hair.

‘Thank you very much,’ said Mr. Johnson. ‘I am sorry to have troubled you.’

I am afraid I rang at an inconvenient time.'

'Not at all,' answered Molly, tranquilly. 'It was quite the contrary, for I had just come in, so I could bring them, for mother is rather tired. We shall have Patty to-morrow.'

As Molly put the candles down on the table, she had looked at the lodger, and she felt pleased. The face might be rugged and lined with thought and care, but the features were good, the deep-set grey eyes had a frank, kind expression, the mouth was firm and well-curved, and the short, thick, grey hair retained something of a boyish carelessness, falling a little loosely over the massive forehead. Molly thought their new lodger the most pleasant and satisfactory-looking man she had ever seen.

‘And who is Patty?’ he rejoined, smiling a little.

‘Patty is the little maid we have to help when we have a lodger. We can’t afford to keep a servant altogether,’ Molly went on, with a simple frankness that won Mr. Johnson’s heart at once, ‘but when we let our rooms we are obliged to have help. Mother can’t do it all, and I am away nearly all day, so we have Patty. She is a very nice girl. They cannot spare her altogether from home, because her mother is delicate, and there are any number of young children, but they are glad for her to earn a little now and then. So we have sent up to Highcote, and she will be here to-morrow.’

‘Highcote!’ exclaimed Mr. Johnson. ‘I was just trying to trace my way to High-

cote on the map. There is an old mill there, is there not ?

‘ Yes,’ answered Molly. ‘ Old Mr. Johnson’s mill. Why,’ she added, smiling, ‘ he is a namesake of yours !’

‘ Yes, just so, and a relation !’

‘ A relation ?’

‘ Yes. This is not my first visit to Bembury. I was here when I was a child—quite a little chap. Except just for the accident of being born in London, I am a native of these parts. Old Johnson of the mill is my uncle ! Indeed, I have come to renew my acquaintance with him. I wonder if you can tell me anything about him. I have not heard from him for many, many years !’

Molly hesitated a moment. The character Mr. Johnson of the mill bore was

not altogether pleasant to describe to his relation. A hard-hearted old miser, a miserable old hunk—one does not like to blurt out such things to enquiring nephews.

‘Mother knows more about him than I do,’ she responded, cautiously. ‘Shall I ask her to come up and tell you?’

‘Perhaps I may go down to her,’ said Mr. Johnson. ‘I shouldn’t like to trouble her to come up.’

Mrs. Scobell had lit the lamp in her parlour, and was resting in her easy-chair. She heard the voices overhead, and rather wondered what Molly and the lodger had to talk about. Her astonishment did not lessen when Molly reappeared, followed by that lodger himself.

‘Mother,’ said the girl, ‘Mr. Johnson

wants you to tell him about Highcote Mill. He says the owner is a relation of his.'

Molly pushed a chair forward as she spoke, while she herself went round to the other side of the square-table, where she had placed some pencils and paper. She had to prepare some drawing copies for her pupils.

'Highcote Mill!' exclaimed Mrs. Scobell. 'Why, to be sure your name is the same. Ah! it is such a pretty place. I have not been able to get as far of late years, else it used to be my favourite walk. I loved to see the water come rushing and foaming under the bridge when the mill was at work. And you think the miller is your relative?'

‘Yes, he is my uncle,’ answered Mr. Johnson. ‘But I know nothing about him. He is not married, is he?’

‘Oh! no,’ said Mrs. Scobell, shaking her head. ‘No, he lives at the Mill House, quite alone with his housekeeper, Rachel Krieghley. She has been there years and years, ever since she was a girl. A nice, clean, industrious woman. People used to think he would marry her, but he never has!’

‘Ah! I am sorry he is unmarried. I hoped to find a tribe of cousins big and little, for I am growing old, and I have just awakened to the fact that I am very much alone in the world.’

‘Ah, sir, you will find none at Highcote, but the old man. They say old Mr. Ed-

ward is too fond of his money ever to care to spend it on wife and child—excuse me for saying so !’

‘ Will you tell me all you can about him ?’ said Mr. Johnson, a little earnestly. ‘ Never mind my feelings, because I have none with regard to him. He never did me any good. He never gave a helping hand to my poor mother when she greatly needed it. Please tell me just the truth.’

Mrs. Scobell was silent a minute or two, thoughtful and reflective.

‘ Well,’ she said at last, ‘ people must speak as they find. Folks say hard things of old Edward Johnson. They say he is a miser—they have even whispered that all was not straight when his uncle died, and left him all the property, and nothing to the elder brother. So I have heard, sir—but

I was not living here then. But as I say—one must speak as one finds, and old Edward was not so hard to me, at any rate. He is, in a way, a tenant of mine, sir. He rents a couple of fields that belonged to my poor husband—and he pays his rent regularly—and,’ here Mrs. Scobell’s voice faltered a little, ‘some time ago, when I was in trouble, he lent me a little money, and he has not been hard about the paying back.’

‘On security, I suppose,’ put in Mr. Johnson, smiling.

‘Yes—on security of the fields,’ replied she, innocently.

‘And deducts the interest from the rent!’ he rejoined.

‘Oh! yes—of course! But he always sends the money *so* regularly. He used to

bring it himself, but he can't get about much now, so he sends Mrs. Krieghley, or else Michael—that is his foreman, sir.'

Mr. Johnson stayed some time longer, but learnt little more. He had made other enquiries about his uncle, and had gathered the notion of a miserly, lonely, sour-tempered, grasping old man. Her colouring was softer, but that might be her own temperament. Then he said good-night, and retired to his own room.

'What a nice man!' exclaimed Mrs. Scobell, 'not a bit stuck-up or proud for all his riches, and Briggs told me he is very rich. He knows some one who knows him in London, one of his clerks, I believe, and he supposes he wants to find some one to leave all his money to. I wonder why he never married?'

‘Wise man,’ said Molly, sententiously.

‘Much better not!’

‘Now, Molly,’ said her mother, rather crossly, ‘I wish you wouldn’t talk like that. It is running against the Bible and your own parents, and isn’t right or dutiful. Marriage was ordained in heaven, and what a frightful place the world would be without any children.’

‘It would be lovely,’ Molly went on, provokingly. ‘No tiresome little brats to drum A B C into. And then there would be an end of everything, and no more worry or bother. Fancy being the last person left, and feeling that when you were dead there would be peace and silence for ever and ever. No more fighting, or struggling, or sorrow and suffering, and the world would go rolling on and on, and the

flowers would bloom, and the soft winds blow, and nobody to mar its beauty. And all the great wicked cities would fall into silent ruin, and the ugly streets would be covered with grass and green leaves. Perhaps some angel would come down and wander about among the remains of Bembury, and wonder who had built the queer little brick boxes scattered about. He would think them the work, perhaps, of some intelligent kind of mole.'

'I can't think,' said Mrs. Scobell, as Molly paused. 'I *cannot* think, Molly, where you get your wild notions from! I brought you up on the Church Catechism as strictly as a girl need be, and you certainly did not get them from me, nor from your poor father, neither. And I hope, Molly, for your own sake, as well as for

mine, you will be careful how you say such things. I don't know what the rector or Dr. Halcroft would think if they heard you. They might say you were not sound, and frighten Mr. Beadon.'

'It is original sin, mother,' said Molly, jumping up and kissing her; 'but, oh! I'll be careful. You would not know me if you saw me in the school-room. I am as stiff as a poker, and as proper as a Puritan, when I am away from you. Besides, I wouldn't waste my notions on them—it would be throwing pearls before swine.'

'Molly,' exclaimed Mrs. Scobell, 'how can you! The rector a—a——!' she could not say the word.

'No, no, no,' laughed Molly, 'I never meant that. But, mother, do you know, I really do like your old gentleman upstairs.'

He has such a *good* look. If he had a daughter, I think she would be very, very proud and fond of him.'

If she had only known it, a kindred thought was in the mind of the upstairs lodger. If he had a daughter like that dark-eyed girl downstairs, how proud and fond he would be of her! And when he went to bed, he dreamt of his old love, and fancied that he had won her, but alas, his joy woke him, to remember with a sigh that that romance had been over five-and-twenty years ago, and that he was a grey-headed old bachelor, out on a sad quest of a relation for an heir.

But he shook off the depression as he sat over his pleasant breakfast, and watched from the window the leisurely way of life in the little town. Then he put on

his wide-awake hat, and took his stick, and set off to walk to Highcote Mill. The pleasantest way at this time of year lay through the fields, Molly told him, which were all golden and white with the buttercups and daisies. The trees were lovely in their new green dresses, all but the tardy ash, delaying as though unwilling to hide the beauty of stem and branch.

Mr. Johnson thoroughly enjoyed himself as he slowly followed the little foot-track that wound through the fresh lush grass, with its wealth of flowers, now passing under the shade of a group of stately elms, now by the side of a brimming little river that rippled and murmured between its sedgy banks. It was a fresh, blowing day, the breeze sweeping the long grass with its nodding crown of buttercups and

sorrel into billowy waves, of which the snowy belt of sheep's parsley growing luxuriantly along the hedges, might have been the foam, and driving the great floating clouds across the wonderful depths of the blue, June sky. The swallows darted above the flowing water, the cuckoo called from hedge and copse, the jaunty water-wagtails flirted their tails and jerked their little heads, as they flitted about the shallows; up somewhere out of sight a lark was raining down his silver music. It was indeed 'jocund spring,' the heart of nature seemed brimming over with the joy of living. A day when the thought of sorrow and death strikes through the heart with a strange jar, as of a discordant note in the midst of perfect music.

“Blessed are they that mourn,” said

Mr. Johnson, as he paused for a moment or two to look round at all the wealth of beauty that surrounded him. ‘That is a hard saying on a day like this.’

He walked on slowly through the blossoming solitude, for it was such, not a human being anywhere about. At last he struck the road again, and soon reached the little hamlet of Highcote, which consisted only of a few red-roofed cottages clustered on either side of the ancient bridge that here spanned the stream, and under which the water came foaming from the old wooden mill on the other side.

The mill was at work. Not only the foaming water told him that, but he could hear the beating thunder of the wheel in the dark recesses of the old building, as he walked into the yard at the side. It

was a spacious enclosure, one side of which was lined with sheds, under which many sacks were ranged. A man whistling a slow country tune came slouching across from one of these. Mr. Johnson went towards him, and spoke.

‘Is Mr. Edward Johnson here?’

‘Eh!’ said the man, staring. ‘D’ye mean the measter?’

‘Yes, I suppose so. This is Highcote Mill, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it be,’ drawled the fellow, slowly. ‘But the measter bain’t hereabouts. He be fixed up with the rheumatiz at home.’

‘And where is his home?’

‘Theer,’ was the reply.

The man pointed, as he spoke, at a low, long, red-tiled house that adjoined the mill-yard.

Mr. Johnson thanked the man in words, but a half-crown transferred from his pocket to the brown hand seemed more intelligible, and he explained that the master had been ill for some time, and unable to walk. He was better now, though, and they expected him round again soon.

Mr. Johnson left the yard by the gate at which he had entered, and turned in at the little garden which fronted the mill house. There were rose-bushes in it, not yet in bloom, patches of blue iris and wall-flowers, some overblown, gaping, yellow and red tulips, and blue and yellow pansies. A honeysuckle already in bud climbed over the lattice-work that formed a porch for the green, front door. It was a red-brick, picturesque cottage, with a

tiled roof, lovely with moss and lichen. On one side of the door was a long latticed window, with stone mullions, and beyond the building seemed to straggle away rather indefinitely. It had the appearance of having once been a good house, fallen on evil days, curtailed and patched, and out-at-elbows.

In answer to his knock a little, middle-aged woman appeared. She had bright dark eyes, and hair beginning to be streaked with silver threads. A big coarse apron covered her cotton dress, and her sleeves were rolled up above her elbows.

‘Mr. Johnson is in,’ she replied, with a rather hesitating manner, ‘but he be bad with the rheumatiz. I don’t know if he can see strangers.’

‘I am not altogether a stranger,’ an-

swered Mr. Johnson, quietly. ‘I am a relative. Tell your master that his nephew wishes to see him—his nephew William from London!’

As he spoke, he walked into the little passage, and then again waited, not knowing which turn to take.

‘His nephew William!’ The woman echoed his words with a kind of gasp.

For a moment she flushed red, and then as quickly grew pale. Then, without further words, she led the way down the passage and opened the door which led into the kitchen.

It was a fair-sized room with a red-brick floor and a large fireplace. The window looked into a vegetable-garden, and near the window a door opened into a sort of scullery, where evidently most of

the rough work was done. The kitchen itself was as neat as possible. A piece of carpet was spread in the middle of the floor, and on it stood a table scrubbed as white as snow. A row of scarlet geraniums in vividly red pots were ranged in the window, the brasses and kettles and pots and pans shone like looking-glasses, a starling in a wicker cage was whistling ‘Rule Britannia.’ In a wooden arm-chair lined with cushions, near the fire, which burnt brightly in the grate, but turned so that its occupant could look across the garden to the mill-yard, sat an old man with his legs and knees wrapped in a thick rug, and his swathed feet on a footstool. A little table stood at his right hand, on which was an inkstand, some ruled paper

on a blotting-pad, and a few account-books.

‘Here’s a gentleman come to see ye,’ said the woman, abruptly, as she let Mr. Johnson pass into the room.

She herself followed, and went into the outer kitchen, where she seemed busy peeling potatoes, but she left the door between the two rooms ajar.

‘How do you do, Uncle Edward?’ said Mr. Johnson, walking across the kitchen and holding out his hand to the occupant of the chair.

The old man gave a great start.

‘Eh?’ he said, staring up at his visitor.

‘Eh—what do ye say?’

The old miller was a rugged-featured old fellow. His eyes were rather dim and

sunken, and his skin lined and withered. He had a great quantity of thick, rough, perfectly white hair, and an untidy beard, also white and thick. The hands, brown and sinewy, with the purplish black veins very evident, grasped the arms of his chair tightly as he stared up under his brows at his visitor.

‘I am your nephew William,’ repeated Mr. Johnson, ‘the son of your brother Thomas.’

The old man gazed at him oddly. If it had not seemed so very improbable, William Johnson would have called the look in his face fear; but that was impossible. He might be astonished, but nothing more.

‘My nephew,’ he said at last, ‘my nephew William. Oh! yes. I remember

now, Thomas had two boys—but I thought they were dead.’

‘I am not dead,’ said his nephew, taking a chair near his uncle. ‘You are thinking of my brother George. He died—of scarlet fever, when he was quite a lad.’

‘And your mother? Be she still livin’?’

‘No. She is dead. She died many years ago. I am quite alone, so I thought I would come and look you up.’

‘Eh! yes,’ replied the old man. ‘All alone, be ye—eh! just so, just so.’ He looked furtively at his visitor as he released his chair from his grasp and rubbed his large, lean hands slowly one over another. ‘And what might your business

be, nephew? You look pretty well in the world. Eh! is that so?’

‘Yes,’ answered William, smiling a little. ‘Yes. I am pretty well off, thank you, uncle. I do not need to work hard now. I am in no want of money.’

The old man was perceptibly reassured, and his manner thawed a little.

‘That’s well,’ he said, emphatically. ‘Yes—so—that’s well. If you did, it would have been no use comin’ here. Times are bad, terribly bad, and have been so these years past, and now here be I all crippled up, and can’t see after nothin’, and the people all wastin’ and slouchin’ about, and not doin’ a good day’s work in a week. Just a bare livin’ have I made out of the mill. It was a bad

business for me when your grand-uncle left it to me.' The dull grey eyes flashed in a strange way, at these words, a look that slightly startled William by its expression of mingled spite, and fear, and triumph. 'I was tied down here by the leg, and hadn't no chance of going to London and making my fortune, as you have done.'

Just then a slight sound across the room attracted William Johnson's attention. He glanced up quickly, and saw the face of the woman, who had admitted him, peering eagerly through the crack of the door. As she met his glance, she turned hurriedly away, and went on with her potato-peeling.

'Indeed,' responded William to these last remarks, 'but how is that, uncle? I

remember hearing my father say that it used to be a capital business, and that our grand-uncle was what he called a "warm" man. Money in the bank, besides land, and you came in for it all, uncle! He left nothing to us, as you very well know.'

'*I* know,' cried the old man, with that same old flash in the eyes—suspicious, fearful, alarmed. 'What do I know? What right have ye to come here and say what I know? I know nothing about it. It was a good will—I say—and ye dursn't say otherways!'

'I don't say anything otherways,' said Mr. Johnson, looking at him with some astonishment, 'but, of course, you know what was in the will, for you were sole inheritor.'

‘Yes, yes,’ said the old man, sinking back in his chair, ‘I be an old fool. Yes, yes, nephew, of course I know. I—I just mistook your meaning. Yes—but you are mistook too—or leastways your father—there was very little, I assure ye—very little in the bank—and bad debts—oh, terrible debts. But I am glad ye don’t want for money. You look well—yes, and well-dressed, too. I most wonder ye are not too smart to come and see rough folk like we be. Ye’re more fit to go and see your fine cousin up at the Court, as passes me by as if I wur just a clod in the road—and yet, for all that, I be her next-of-kin, if so be she wur to die. But we be too rough for you, from the look o’ ye. But, now, what did yer come for—straight out now—if ye didn’t come for money?’

‘Why, straight out, uncle, I came to find my relations, because I felt alone in the world, and I am tired of being alone.’

‘Did ye never marry?’ inquired his uncle.

‘No. I am a bachelor, like you—at least, I see no signs here of wife or child.’

‘Wife and child!’ answered the old man, gruffly. ‘No, no, I want no wife poking into things as don’t concern her, and spending money in folly and waste. Women folks be allers prying,’ he added, with an angry glance at that unlatched door, from whence came a flash of brown eyes.

‘But who is this fine cousin who won’t know you?’ inquired William, curiously.

The old man made an uneasy motion

in his chair, and gave a sort of grunt. His nephew guessed that he was regretting his words.

‘Oh,’ he said at last, ‘that’s an old tale—just an old countryside tale. It don’t consarn you, nephew. But I’ll tell ye another day. My rheumatiz be mortal bad,’ he went on, with a groan, ‘and I can’t talk no more. Next time you come from London, nephew—if so be you trouble to come again—will do for that. So I’ll wish ye good-morning, nephew.’

At this broad hint, Mr. Johnson was forced to rise and take his leave. As he did so, the little woman came out again from the back kitchen.

‘Won’t the gentleman take a glass of ale after his walk?’ she said.

Mr. Johnson accepted the offer, though it was not very cordially backed by his uncle.

‘The ale be sour,’ said that worthy; ‘my nevvv won’t care for that stuff, Rachel. He drinks port-wine and champagne, he does.’

But Mr. Johnson persisted that he would like the ale. It gave him a sort of mischievous pleasure to get something out of the old miser.

‘It is capital ale,’ he said, as he set down the glass. ‘You have not tasted it lately, uncle. Thank you, Mrs. Rachel, it is very refreshing.’

As he walked away from the house, William Johnson felt slightly perplexed, with a sense of some mystery. The suspicion of the old man, the watchful eye of

the housekeeper, impressed him with the idea that they shared some sordid secret. And who was the cousin that the old man spoke of in haste, and then seemed sorry he had mentioned?

‘My relations seem turning out to be rather queer characters, now I have found them,’ he muttered to himself, as he turned towards the footpath by which he had come.

Meantime, a curious scene was taking place in the mill kitchen. No sooner had the woman—her name was Mrs. Kreighley—shut the door on Mr. Johnson than she returned to her master, who was glooming and muttering in his chair.

‘I telled ye they ’ud come some day,’ she said, twisting her coarse apron round her bare arms as she stood opposite him.

‘Eh! ye are a fine sight at prophesyin’, ain’t you,’ said the old man, in a sneering voice, ‘all you say comes true unfailin’, don’t it?’

‘It does most times,’ she said, quite unmoved by his irony. ‘It belongs to our family. Aunt Broughton allers had the creeps when anything was goin’ to happen like, and I has ’em too. I know’d somethin’ ’ud come up about that there will!’

‘The will was a good will,’ the old man said, fiercely. He looked at the woman with a sort of snarl as he spoke. ‘It was proved all reg’lar, and is up in Lunnon this here minute.’

‘It worn’t the will I wrote my name up-on,’ said the woman, calmly; ‘you did some’at with it, you know you did.’

‘You dreamed it,’ said the old man, his

hands twisting together, and his whole expression showing how he was longing to get up and beat this woman who defied him. ‘D’ye think any folks would believe your tales? The will’s a good will, I say.’

‘I didn’t dream it, you were writin’ and writin’, copyin’ of some’at that night the old man died, I seed you put the pen in his hand, and he couldn’t hold it, and then ye wrote somethin’ yersel’.’

‘Hould your tongue, I say,’ shouted the old man, his face flushing red with anger and his hands clenched and trembling. ‘You old hag, how dare ye say it?’

‘Old hag,’ replied the woman, tossing her head in disdain. ‘Oh, very well. I’ll just go after your nephew—he ain’t far away—and tell him what I saw.’

The old man recovered himself by a

great effort, and swallowed his wrath.

‘Come, come, Rachel,’ he said, in a gentler tone and laying his withered hand on her arm for a moment, ‘don’t be angry. No, no, o’ coorse you are not an old hag, you’re a fine woman, but you just vex me with your stories of dreams and nonsense. I tell ye what, my dear, when my rheumatics is gone we’ll get married we will. I’ve been a-meanin’ to ask ye this ever so long, but I’ve been that busy, I hain’t had the time, but soon as ever I can walk up the chutch, there we’ll be fixed.’

‘Oh! will we,’ answered the woman. She was scornful, yet a little mollified. ‘D’ye think I’m a-goin’ to marry an old scarecrow like you? Ye should ha’ asked me sooner, my man; your rheumatics ’ull only

have one cure, and that's chutchyard mould, that is. But I can't waste all the morning talking, only you remember that I telled ye they 'ud come some day, and so they has.'

She went out into the back kitchen as she spoke, and made a great splashing with water, and a clattering among pots and pans. Presently she returned with her potatoes in a saucepan, and put it on the fire. Her master sat watching her uneasily; he had given up trying to add up his accounts, and the books lay unheeded on the table beside him. She went backwards and forwards to the outer kitchen with her preparations for the midday meal, but in silence, her lips pursed up and pressed close together. At last it was the old man who broke the silence.

‘He’s got lots of money, this chap who has been here this morning,’ he said, watching the woman closely as he spoke.

‘No thanks to you if he has!’ was the grim reply.

‘It was much better for him,’ went on the old man, ‘that old uncle didn’t leave him the mill. He was a bit of a boy, and his father was dead. What could he ha’ done with it? And a wretched old place it is, and a failin’ trade. Wish I hadn’t had it, that I do. I might ha’ gone to London, and grown rich and a gentleman like this chap.’

‘Pity you took it then, when it war’nt yours,’ answered the woman.

‘Pity I took it,’ screamed the old man, banging his fist on the table in his sudden but impotent rage, and upsetting the ink

bottle in his energy. ‘How dare you say I took it?—you—you old witch! The will gave it me, and the will’s a good will, and the lawyers proved it, and settled it all.’

‘There, look at that there ink a-running all down on my clean floor and the carpet,’ exclaimed the woman. ‘Bless me, it’s well to get in a rage, and call folks names, and spoil good furniture because your relations come to see ye.’ As she spoke she wiped up the ink with a wet cloth, and rubbed the carpet vigorously.

‘This chap ain’t married,’ said the old man, as he watched the cleansing process going on. His mind was so disturbed by his nephew’s advent that he could not help talking about it, although the woman’s replies angered him so. ‘He must be the only one of the fam’ly left now, and he

ain't young. The old stock's pretty nigh wore out now. All in chutchyard save he and I! And we hev had the mill this two hundred year, we have!

‘Didn’t your old uncle have a sister? Seems as if I have heard o’ one. Yes, I mind now. Old Mrs. Brown, whose mother was housekeeper up at the Court, when Miss Ann there ran away with your grandfather, told me. My sakes! How mad those grand Leonards must have been when she done it! Nevertheless, Miss Leonard up there be your cousin, and ’ud be mine too, if so be I listened to you. Law! suppose we sent her weddin’-cards!’ and the little woman burst into a peal of really merry laughter, that rang strangely through the room, unaccustomed now to any sounds of mirth. ‘But,’ she went on,

‘I know that Miss Ann had a daughter as well as two sons, your old uncle and your father. Her name was Mary, and Mrs. Brown said her mother told her, she were a bonny maid—took after her mother’s family and was quite the lady. She married too, didn’t she?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said the old man. ‘Yes, to be sure I mind it now. She married a doctor fellow, lived away west somewhere. Exeter or Plymouth. Yes, but I never heerd no more on her.’

‘She may have had childer. But now, dinner’s ready. I’m goin’ to dish it and call Michael in!’

The busy little woman put the smoking hot dinner on the table, and the kitchen was full of an odour grateful to empty stomachs. She pushed her master’s chair,

and him in it to the side, and then went outside and rang a bell, and soon a long man in a white shirt and trousers came slouching in. He shook a little snowstorm of flour out of his shirt-sleeves as he unrolled them and sat down to table.

Michael was foreman, and managed everything now his master was laid up. It had been arranged he should take his mid-day meal at the mill house, so that he might report progress. Mrs. Kreighley took the head of the table, and dispensed generous portions of the viands, and poured out the beer from the ample jug which stood at her elbow.

Michael was of a silent turn. He did not speak a single word till the business of dinner was nearly over, and a good store of fuel laid up in the recesses of the

human machinery he owned. Then, after a long pull at his mug of beer, he opened his lips for another than receptive purposes.

‘Strangers about,’ he said, slowly. ‘Chap been here?’

The old man nodded.

‘Lunnon chap?’ inquired Michael.

‘Yes,’ said the old man, rather sharply, as if he would suggest it was no business of Michael’s where his visitors came from.

‘Thought so,’ went on Michael. ‘Another chap been drawin’ out the mill. Queer trade that. Lunnon chap went over and looked at him, and then they went back together.’

‘Went back wheer?’ asked the old miller, looking up sharply.

‘Doan’t know,’ said Michael. ‘Bem-bury ways, I guess. Oh! theer’s Fox

been here about that sack of corn again.'

The talk drifted into business matters, till Mrs. Kreighley rose and pushed her chair back sharply from the table as a sign that time for rest was over. Michael slouched away to his mill, and old Johnson was pushed back to his corner, and supplied with a pipe and some tobacco. Mrs. Kreighley bustled about and cleared up the kitchen. Then there was a clatter of dishes and plates, and a splashing of water, till silence prevailed in the lower region, while a footstep was heard going up the wooden stair to the regions overhead. Old Edward Johnson listened to all the movements while he slowly puffed his pipe.

'I'd like to be sure,' he thought to himself, 'how much she *does* know. I wish

a'most now I had married her when I found out, then 'twould be her interest too; but theer, a wife's a handful, even the best of 'em, and Rachel's a reg'lar little spitfire. I can surely make it worth her while to hould her tongue between her teeth. I've promised her a legacy. I'll tell her I'll leave it all to her. She won't know till I'm dead, and then it can't be changed. But it doan't much matter who has it then, though it is hard to think how they'll manage without me. Eh! it's a weary world. Here have I been toiling and moiling, and savin' and denyin' of myself all these years, and what's the good now? It's all vanity, as the parsons say; but yet, it's nice to think it's theer—a nice, comfortable bit of money in the bank. I'd ha' kept it here and had the

pleasure of it, ony now I can't get about, Rachel 'ud go poking round and find it. But I needn't think of wills yet. I'm only seventy—on'y just seventy, and lots of folks lives to eighty and ninety. Why, old Job Hodder wur a hundred when he died; and though my legs is queer, my head's as clear as a bell. But I'll think it over, and send for Lawyer Hadley one of these days. That chap said he didn't want for money. It's wonderful strange his turnin' up now, but I wonder what he has come for? And I'd like to know how much that old cat knows too!

If he could have crept upstairs after Mrs. Kreighley, he would have learnt something of which he had never dreamed. That little woman, safe in the retirement of her own chamber, had turned back a

corner of a bit of old carpet that covered part of the floor, and raised a loose board of the flooring. From the dark recess underneath she had drawn forth a small box, and from this again took a piece of folded blue paper. As she opened it, it could be seen that its edges were charred and singed, and the surface itself scorched and brown, as though it had been snatched from the flames just as it was on the point of being consumed. Mrs. Kreighley stood looking thoughtfully at one part where her own name was still legible, with another written just below it.

‘That theer is the paper I signed,’ she said to herself, ‘and I niver wrote two on ’em. That t’other paper as is up in Lunnon is what he was so busy a-writin’ of that night while his poor old uncle lay

dead upon his bed. If I had knowed of this chap as came here to-day, I'd have spoke, but there didn't seem no one to make a fuss for. But if he doan't behave civil, I'll tell. At any rate, I've gotten the whip hand of old measter now !'

CHAPTER IV.

‘THERE is our lodger,’ said Molly to Miss Leonard.

‘Your lodger!’ cried that lady. ‘That your lodger—why, I know that gentleman. I met him several times in London; he paid for little Johnny Burton to go to the seaside, where he got so well. Stop, Molly, I want to speak to him. Fancy his being your lodger!’

Miss Leonard had driven into Bembury to do some shopping, to see Mrs. Scobell,

and now she was returning to Mote Court, bringing Molly with her for the afternoon reading. She had resigned the reins to her companion, knowing what a pleasure it was to the girl to drive.

Molly drew up the two pretty, grey ponies to the side of the road, and Mr. Johnson came towards them, raising his hat with a look of surprised pleasure on his face. Molly thought to herself again what a good face it was.

‘Why, Miss Leonard,’ said Mr. Johnson, ‘this is an unexpected pleasure.’

‘Did you not know I lived here?’ she answered, as she shook hands with him.

‘No, indeed, I did not! Your friends always spoke of your living in Southshire, but that is a little vague. And you have another friend with you.’

As he spoke, he smiled and put out his hand to Molly.

‘Yes, this is a very great friend of mine,’ said Miss Leonard, emphatically, ‘and so is her mother. I understand you are staying there. But where are you going now?’

‘I am going to try if I can see an old house called Mote Court, which was described to me in a most enthusiastic manner by a gentleman whom I have met here, and who has been sketching there, I believe.’

‘Mote Court!’ laughed Miss Leonard. ‘Then you had better get in and let Molly drive you thither, for we are all bound in the same direction.’

‘Are we? Why, you do not mean that it is your house, Miss Leonard?’

‘It is indeed. Do get in!’ And as he

obeyed, and Molly let her ponies go on, Miss Leonard continued, 'I have always wanted to thank you for your extreme kindness to that poor little boy in whom I was much interested. I had to leave town in a hurry, but I heard about it from my friends.'

'I was only too glad to be able to be of use,' said Mr. Johnson, and then for a little while the two were taken up in discussing the case in which Mr. Johnson had taken a practical interest. 'The boy came back really restored to health,' he told Miss Leonard, 'and his lameness almost cured, and he has got employment in a large florist's grounds. The lad is passionately fond of flowers, and is earning a first-rate character.'

Molly sat silent, guiding her ponies

along the pleasant, level road, shaded by great elms, listening to her companions' talk. As they turned in at the lodge, and swept round to the house, they passed Maurice Driver, who was busy with a bit of the moat and the older side of the house. He looked up as they drove by, pulling off his cap to the ladies, and staring to see Mr. Johnson with them.

‘That is my informant,’ said Mr. Johnson, ‘as to the charms of Mote Court. I see he did not exaggerate its beauty.’

‘Do you know him?’ asked Miss Leonard. ‘He seems a nice young fellow.’

‘I never spoke to him before,’ answered Mr. Johnson, ‘but I know him quite well by sight and reputation, and intended to get acquainted with him. He lives in my neighbourhood with his mother, who, I

believe, is a charming woman. He has the reputation of being a rising young architect—very clever and persevering. He draws for some of the best magazines.'

'Oh! that is all right then,' said Miss Leonard. 'He came asking permission to sketch, and I was pleased with his appearance, but of course it is much better to know something of people. We will have tea now, Molly, and then we will show Mr. Johnson the house if he likes.'

Mr. Johnson sat very contentedly in the summer parlour, chatting to Miss Leonard, and watching Molly making the tea from the little silver kettle which Jones had brought in. Miss Leonard always had tea made in the room, disliking the doubtful results of kitchen brewing. He had taken a great liking for this quiet handsome girl,

who looked now so much like the daughter of the house, that it was difficult to realise that she had been drudging through the multiplication table with the little Beadons all the morning, and supplementing Patty's efforts in cooking and waiting the rest of the day. If he had married, he might have had a daughter like her to cheer up his later years, or had the Fates been kinder, this girl might have been a relation, instead of that crusty old miser at Highcote.

Just then Maurice came in. Jones had been out to inform him that afternoon tea was ready, and Maurice, rather curious as to Mr. Johnson's arrival, came at once. He was extremely surprised to find that gentleman established on the footing of quite an old friend. 'He didn't know any-

thing about the place yesterday,' thought Maurice. But, of course, he made no remark, but handed about cups and cake as in duty bound. Then, when they had finished, he produced a sketch-book.

'Do you know, Miss Leonard,' he said, 'I have been haunted by your legend of Lady Betty, and have been trying to illustrate it. Will you tell me if these in the least do it justice.'

He showed some sketches in charcoal grey. The arrival of the messenger, Lady Betty and her faithless lover, the fatal end by the moat-side, and then a weird night-scene of the phantom maiden gliding down the lime-tree walk, wringing her hands with a ghostly agonised face, gleaming ghastly in the moonlight.

‘These are capital.’ Miss Leonard pronounced judgment with the authority of conviction. ‘Are these to go in the magazine article?’

‘Article,’ exclaimed Maurice. ‘I shall want a volume, I am sure I could make sketches enough to fill one, if somebody else would write it for me. I am such a duffer at writing.’

Mr. Johnson noticed that Molly looked up suddenly, with a quick movement that betrayed more interest in the conversation than she had previously shown. It suggested an idea to him which some further words of Miss Leonard’s confirmed.

‘You had better ask Miss Scobell to help you,’ she said, lightly, with a smile at Molly. ‘She knows all the legends and

traditions of this house better even than I do. But come, we must show Mr. Johnson all our antiquities.'

They went first to the drawing-room to see poor Betty's portrait, and then upstairs to the turret-chamber where she had died, and where her wailing spirit had been so long bricked up.

'I am glad they let her out, poor thing,' said Molly. 'It must have been dull fastened up here. How glad she must have been to slip down to her avenue again, and feel the cool breeze on her poor ghostly face.'

'It would be rather close quarters certainly for any length of time,' assented Maurice, as he glanced round the small apartment. It was square but for one corner where the turret joined on to the

main building; the thickness of the wall was shown by the deep-set casement-window. A heavy old press stood there, and an old oaken bedstead, with a table and two or three heavy leather-covered chairs. Two or three pictures, one a portrait, hung upon the wall.

‘Does Lady Betty walk now?’ enquired Mr. Johnson, ‘or is her poor perturbed spirit at rest?’

‘The villagers say she does,’ answered Miss Leonard. ‘They will not go near the lime-tree walk, if they can help it, after dark. But I have never seen her. I am no ghost seer, as I tell Mr. Driver!’

‘I think I am,’ said Mr. Johnson, with a slight, involuntary shiver. ‘I would not sleep in this room for worlds. It seems to me full of sounds and impalpable

movements. But tell me whose is this portrait hanging here? The eyes of this poor lady have been following me about to each part of the room with the most mournful persistence. It is not Lady Betty I see—the dress is a hundred years later in fashion. It is uncommonly well painted. Surely this lady had a history also?’

‘Ah! yes.’ Miss Leonard paused a moment, looking gravely at the portrait. ‘Yes, she had a history, too, poor thing, and to my mind one as sad, though not so romantic as poor Lady Betty. I rescued that picture from a garret, when I was young, and hung it up here, because my father objected to it being where strangers would see it, and ask about it. She—the original of this picture—was considered

to have utterly disgraced her family, and the event was too recent in those days for it to have lost the touch of shame, and acquired the romance of history.'

'It is very interesting to have ancestors,' said Maurice. 'Don't you think so, Miss Scobell?'

'I am not sure,' answered Molly. 'In the light of modern science, ancestors rather destroy one's identity. I think perhaps one feels more oneself if one doesn't know anything about them.'

'What *do* you mean, Molly?' said Miss Leonard, sharply, 'These are some of your radical notions, I expect.'

'Oh, no, quite the contrary. For once I am a conservative,' answered Molly. 'You see, according to the theory of heredity, you are a sort of hotch-potch or general-

mix-up of all your ancestors. You inherit your nose from one grandmother, and your temper from another. Indeed, you can trace back a love of apples to Eve, and a tendency to say, "Please, sir, it wasn't me, it was t'other fellow," to Adam. In fact, after spreading out all your characteristics, and apportioning each to your forbears, you look in vain for yourself, and find you have vanished. So I don't think I care much about my ancestors. I would rather preserve my own identity, even though it may really be a fiction. I like to feel myself as long as I can.'

'I don't think there is much doubt about your being yourself, Miss Scobell,' said Mr. Johnson, with an amused look. 'Your identity, however you came by it,

is certainly strongly marked. But to return to this lady,' indicating the portrait, 'may we hear her history? I should imagine that she was pretty sure of her own existence, and very much inclined to follow her own will in all matters.'

'Yes, you are right there,' replied Miss Leonard. 'She followed her own wayward will, and repented herself when too late. She was beautiful, as you can see by the portrait, and very wilful and obstinate, and always got her own way. Her mother was a sickly, delicate woman, weak in body and mind. It seems to me rather a curious fact, and not quite reconcilable with the new notions that weak-minded women generally have strong-minded daughters, just as clever men mostly have stupid sons. But, however, thus it

was in this case, the mother had no control over the daughter, and the girl ran wild about the country, and made everyone do as she wished. When she was about nineteen, she was constantly meeting a handsome young man, but not of her own station in life. He was the son of a miller in the neighbourhood. The family still own the old mill at Highcote.'

'Ah!' ejaculated Mr. Johnson.

Maurice also exclaimed at the name.

'The mill at Highcote! That picturesque old place by the bridge. I was there yesterday morning.'

'So was I,' said Mr. Johnson.

'Isn't it a lovely old place?' said Molly.
'I always break the tenth commandment when I pass it, and I wish I was the miller of Highcote.'

‘I thought you had other aspirations, Molly?’ said Miss Leonard. ‘Well, this Thomas Johnson was very handsome, and was in some ways superior to his station, which in those days was considered much below hers. At last rumours of these meetings reached her father’s ears. He caught the young people together, horse-whipped the young man after the fashion of those days, and brought his daughter home and locked her up in her bed-room, in the good old romantic fashion. But one morning, when they took her breakfast, they found the bird flown. She had escaped from the window, and fled with her lover. They were married somewhere in London, returned to Highcote man and wife, and the first time the father and daughter met was in the porch of Bembury

Church, the Sunday after the young people's return. They say the old man gazed straight at his child without the slightest sign of recognition, and when she, determined to make him notice her, stood right in the doorway so that there was no room to pass, he called the beadle and bade him order that person to move, so that the parishioners could enter the church.'

'And did he do so?'

'Her husband dragged her away, and bade her never speak to her own people again, and I believe she never made any other attempt at reconciliation or recognition. But Sunday by Sunday the father and daughter gazed at each other—my great-grandfather from his pew in the chancel staring down at his daughter in her more lowly seat in the nave. Her

name was never mentioned in my great-grandfather's presence; it was also erased from the family Bible, and her portrait, which had been painted just a few months before her flight, was hidden away in a garret. Some say it was put there for safety, or her father would have cut it into ribands.'

'And the lady herself, was she happy in her choice?' inquired Mr. Johnson.

He had become a little paler during this recital, thinking he had found relations now of whom he had little dreamed.

'Oh, no, poor thing, far from it. Her husband was very uneducated, and she was cut off from all such society as she had been accustomed to, and the people she had married among did not like her. She had a violent, ill-regulated temper, and

there were constant quarrels and contentions. She died quite young, soon after her youngest child was born.'

'And of course you have never recognised the family as relations?'

'No—at least, my grandfather never would, nor did my father, and now there is no one to recognise, only a crusty old man who has the reputation of certainly being a miser, if not guilty of worse misdemeanours. If there were young people now, it might be different. I am a lonely old woman, and am rather a liberal in such matters than a conservative. Besides, they would be my only relatives on my father's side.'

Mr. Johnson looked contemplatively for some time at the picture. At last he spoke, hesitating a little over his words.

‘Will you—would you mind selling this picture, Miss Leonard?’

‘Sell it!’ she said, staring at him.

‘Yes,’ he answered. ‘If you don’t value it much, I don’t mean as to money value, but as to its associations, which cannot be altogether agreeable to you. As a work of art, it is valuable. It is, I imagine, a Sir Joshua.’

‘Yes; it was painted during a stay in London. But I do not think I should like to sell it. It is part of the family history, and the shadows make the substance, you know.’

‘Then would you allow me to have a copy made of it?—of course acknowledging it to be a copy in the most open manner possible.’

Miss Leonard looked at him curiously.

‘ You shall have as many copies as you like,’ she said, ‘ if you will tell me what there is in this portrait that so arouses your interest ?’

‘ Certainly I will tell you. If that lady married Thomas Johnson of Highcote, she is my great-grandmother.’

‘ Your great-grandmother!’ Miss Leonard stood transfixed with astonishment. ‘ Are you related, then, to the old miller at Highcote? Of course the name is similar, but I never dreamt of there being any connection.’

‘ It is a common name; you would not be likely to think of any relationship. But old Edward Johnson is my uncle. I am not proud of him, now I have seen him, but still, as far as I knew, he was all I possessed. My father was his brother.’

‘ And you—have you brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews ?’

‘ No, I am quite solitary. So solitary, that my reason in coming here was to see if I had anyone connected to me by the tie of blood.’

‘ And you found Edward Johnson—and myself,’ said Miss Leonard, laughing. ‘ We are cousins, several times removed, I suppose, but still cousins.’

‘ If you deign to acknowledge the relationship ! I am very glad to do so !’ he answered.

The two middle-aged people stood looking at each other with rather wistful eyes. They were both so alone in the world that the discovery of this new tie had for them a strange pathetic interest. The strength of such a connection appears to increase

in proportion to the solitariness of the discoverer. People with dozens of uncles and aunts and cousins, put little value on it, but to the lonely ones of the world it gains perhaps an undue preciousness. Mr. Johnson could not refrain from the thought of what a difference the knowledge of such a relationship would have made to him in the old days of struggle and toil. Perhaps it was the strain of gentle blood that he had inherited, which had given him the feeling of regret that he had no claim to any kind of family, of which he had always been conscious. If he had only known, many things might have been different.

Meanwhile Maurice and Molly had looked on at the little scene, with that half-contemptuous amusement and pity, with which the young so often regard any

trace of emotion in their elders. One thing gave Maurice some satisfaction, and that was that, glancing at Molly, he had gained from her a more friendly look in answer than he had yet obtained. Had Molly been cordial to him, Maurice probably would have thought little about her, but her very indifferent manner was beginning to pique him into interest. He was not a monster of ugliness and stupidity—so the young man thought to himself—that she need give him such a very cold shoulder. And then she was very pretty, yes, undoubtedly very pretty, with a piquant and picturesque prettiness that was very ensnaring, and she was quick and clever, and could be gay and chatty enough with some people, and why should she treat him with so much scorn? Other girls were glad enough to

talk to him, girls nearly as pretty and a great deal better off than this country governess, whose mother let lodgings. He made up his mind he would not put up with it, he would make her like him, quite ignoring that in such an undertaking there might be more danger for him than for her. Even now, as she went down the wide old staircase, after leaving poor Lady Betty's ghostly room, he could not help following her with his eyes, and noting the graceful curves of her figure, nor feeling a half-pang of jealousy, when standing in the old hall, with the blaze of the afternoon sunlight streaming in through the wide open door.

Mr. Johnson begged leave to walk home with Miss Scobell, and she looked quite bright and pleased at the old

man as she assented to his proposal.

‘Well, cousin,’ said Miss Leonard, holding out her hand to Mr. Johnson, ‘you must come and dine with me to-morrow. Can you put up with the very unfashionable hour of half-past six? Molly, you must come and bring your mother, and perhaps Mr. Driver will join us also.’

Mr. Driver was only too happy. Then he went back to his sketch, and Mr. Johnson and Molly turned down the avenue, it being too late for any reading that day!

‘This has been a day of discoveries,’ the old gentleman said, as they sauntered along under the pleasant shade of the branching limes.

‘Are you not pleased?’ the girl asked, looking at him with interest.

‘Yes: very much!’ he paused as he

spoke, and turning, looked back at the Court with its gables and clustered chimneys, its sun-warmed and lichen-tinted walls, and beyond it a vista of tree-stems and fresh, green foliage, flecked with golden light and soft shadows. 'Yes,' he went on, 'it is pleasant to find oneself connected with such an ancient home of peace as that. But what a goose that great-grandmother of mine must have been !'

'It seems almost incredible a girl could act so, doesn't it?' said Molly. 'One hears of a man now and then giving up everything for a pretty face, but for a woman to throw herself away on a boor, just because he was handsome——Oh ! I beg your pardon,' cried Molly, interrupting herself, consternated at what she was

saying. ‘Of course he was your ancestor also!’

‘Never mind about his being my relative,’ replied her companion, placidly. ‘I think I am not very proud of him. It is a mean thing for a man to drag a girl down to an inferior position. But perhaps she agreed with you, and thought she would like to be miller of Highcote!’

Molly laughed.

‘No,’ she said, ‘she was only the wife of the miller, which is quite a different pair of shoes! And I am not an aristocrat as she was. If I had been, a thousand handsome millers would have never tempted me to quit my station. But being of plebeian sort, I shouldn’t mind having a business to manage myself, you see, corn is such a nice clean stuff. Wouldn’t I

grind the best flour in the country-side? That is the point. I must be the miller himself—or herself rather—not just an appendage.'

'Ah! I understand,' laughed Mr. Johnson. 'Molly Scobell, miller of Highcote! By-the-way, do you know my respected relative—the present head of the firm?'

'I know him a little—as mother told you,' answered Molly. 'And once, I remember when I was a little child, mother let me peep to see the big wheel, and he came out and asked her to bring me in, and showed me a lot of things, and gave me some rosy apples off a tree in the garden.'

'Why, that is the best thing I ever heard of his doing,' cried Mr. Johnson.

‘But now I am going to ask you a question. Why do you think it worse for a woman to give up all for love, than a man?’

‘Why, of course,’ cried Molly. ‘It is quite, quite different. You expect a girl to have more sense and right feeling than a young man. Men are different. A man never does give up all. Even if he finds he has made a mistake, and that the pretty face has no soul behind it, he can go out and work—he has a profession—or at any rate he shoots, and rides, and drinks, and smokes, and forgets all about his home! But a woman has to stay at home and endure. And fancy having vowed to honour and obey a man whom you find afterwards to be no better than a handsome brute without a soul or a heart.’

‘ Ah ! you don’t like the obedience !’ Mr. Johnson looked at her half smiling.

‘ It is not the obedience one would mind if he were better than oneself,’ cried the girl, hotly. ‘ You would *love* to obey one nobler and wiser than you are yourself. But——’

‘ But you think there are not many such !’

The girl did not reply for a minute, and they walked on slowly in silence.

‘ You will think me very arrogant and conceited,’ she said at last. ‘ Of course, I know there are great and good men—the great writers, the poets, the painters, the musicians, the doctors—yes, and many who, though in some ways less than the highest, are great and good. But—but I have never met them ! The men I have

known have had all the chances in life, all the privileges, all the help that anyone could give them, and have flung every opportunity away, and wasted their lives, and degraded their souls. Yet they are men, and have the mastery and the power, and though one despises them, the woman is always beaten. I am very rude,' she said, with a little laugh, after a pause. 'Somehow I quite forgot you were a man. Now do please begin to abuse us. I know we women seem as bad to you men, as you do to us.'

'Do you?' he replied, smiling, 'I have not found it so, and it strikes me you generalise too much on too narrow premises. First impressions need correction. In ten years' time you will have modified many opinions. But, however, you have

answered me one question. Now I want to ask another. May I?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Molly, ‘of course you may, and I will try to be more polite in my answer.’

‘Well then, why don’t you write that article on Bembury which Mr. Driver wants?’

‘I!’ exclaimed the girl, her face flushing crimson. ‘I—why, what made you think of my doing it?’

‘Because I believe you could do it, and do it well,’ he replied, gravely. ‘Never mind how I know. I am very old, you see, so I ought to be wise, and a bit of a conjurer, perhaps, into the bargain. You have thought of writing—I mean of literature as a profession—have you not?’

The girl looked at him almost frightened.

‘ You must be a conjurer indeed,’ she said. ‘ How *could* you know ?’

‘ Perhaps it was a fellow-feeling,’ answered the old gentleman, tranquilly. ‘ I, too, had hopes, aspirations once. I thought that perhaps I might sit among the immortals. It was a vain hope, but I think I recognise the same feeling in you. In you it may not be futile. Will you tell me what you have done, how far you have succeeded ? Forget again that I am a man, and tell me all about it.’

Molly looked up at the kindly face, at the gentle, half amused, half sad expression in the deep-set grey eyes. In her heart she thought how happy she would be if she had had a father like this. How she would have loved him, and waited on him, and been so proud of him ! Her

memories of her own father, translated by present knowledge, were not agreeable. He had been kind to her—sometimes, but she remembered the blood-shot eyes, the thick, loud, coarse voice, the reeling gait, the oaths. Once she had seen him strike her mother with his great fist. It was at night, when he came into the bed-room where she slept in a little crib in a corner of the room. She remembered how she had sprung up shrieking and rushed to her mother, with a vague, childish thought of defending her. She remembered the bruise on her mother's temple for days after, and how the poor lady had tried to hide it under her hair. How her childish heart had swelled with rage at the sight of it!

But here was something quite different,

a revelation of a new order of beings. The only man she had cared for before was the old curate, and she had cared for him because he had been like a nice, gentle old lady. He was gentle and good and kind, but meek and enduring, with no manly fire, no enterprise. It was a man's prerogative to succeed ! There was the world open before them, and however poor they might be, or however adverse their circumstances, resolution could wrest some prizes from it. But a woman was held back by a thousand invisible ties of prejudice or of circumstance.

If she, Molly, had been a boy, she would have been sent to the grammar-school at least, where there were scholarships and exhibitions to be won, or she would have been put to some trade or profession—

those roads and paths to fortune and fame that, once started in, any man with a purpose can climb. But a girl is mostly left to wander with aimless feet, and has to struggle through briars and thorns before she can even enter the faintest beginning of such a track !

If she had only been her brother—that brother who was now but a grief and a burden to them—what things would she not have done? Poor Molly, with her quick brain, and sensitive heart, and burning ambition! Ah! that ambition over which moralists shake their heads, and yet which, when pure and honest, is one of the great elevating forces of humanity! How much more often it burns in the hearts of women than is at all realised! How often that eager fire, smothered over

by circumstance and prejudice, is the torture of a life, which, if it had had free play, it might have ennobled and exalted. Some fairy godmother had lit it in Molly Scobell's heart, and there it burnt with a steady though hidden flame. In some way she was determined she would break through the trammels that bound her, escape from the narrow life, the grinding poverty, the inferior position in which she was placed. She never thought of marriage as a means of release, as many girls would. She wanted to win her way by her own endeavours, and a sort of disdain she had acquired for mankind made the very thought of marriage distasteful to her.

So she had sat in her little, barely furnished room at night, and reviewed all the means at her command for attaining her

purpose. Music she felt she had not sufficient genius for. Art! but she had no opportunity of cultivating what talent she had. There was not even a School of Art at Bembury, and her mother shrank from the idea of quitting a place where the few friends she had resided, and launching herself in that unknown sea of London. But literature—there was a road which might be travelled over amid a thousand disadvantages. First it required no outlay—paper and ink were cheap, and with those, a few volumes of old books, and a quick imagination—all inexpensive materials—a world might arise. And what a world once we step inside it! The barest walls are then hung with glowing pictures; along the dustiest, dreariest roads walk with us the noble, the good,

the fair, and the witty. In their conversation we forget the dull talk of the humdrum folks around, their griefs and joys make us oblivious for the time to our own more sordid and common-place emotions. At will thus a curtain is lifted, and we enter a life that is not dreamed of by our neighbour who is snoring in the next-door best bedroom. Oh ! poor neighbour, we are sorry for you. You are rich perhaps, or at any rate have a settled income, regular in its amount, and paid quarterly. We are poor, and sometimes hungry, and mostly shabby in our clothing, and perhaps put a peculiar emphasis on that clause in our prayer which concerns the getting of daily bread ; but yet we are richer than you, for we can escape away into the Elysian fields, and an hour with

the Immortals is worth ever so many weeks even in the Agora of Athens, or among the Syrian merchants.

This was the path Molly had chosen. This was the world she had entered unknown to any, even her mother ; and now, for a moment, she stood aghast that this stranger had penetrated her secret.

‘How can you know?’ she gasped again.

He laughed a little.

‘It is true, then?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ answered the girl, ‘it is true, but I have not succeeded at all. I have written some stories and other things, and sent them, but they have always come back!’

‘Yes, they mostly do at first, I believe ; at least, generally so. But you mean to go on?’

‘I must go on,’ Molly said. ‘I can’t seem to help it!’

‘That is a good sign. Well, now, I have some friends among the publishers, and perhaps might help you. Will you let me see some of your work?’

About an hour after their return, Molly knocked at the drawing-room door. She had some manuscripts in her hands, which were trembling slightly, and there was a flush of colour on her cheeks.

‘I have brought you the papers,’ she said, nervously.

‘Thank you,’ answered Mr. Johnson, stretching out his hand for the papers. ‘May I keep them for a day or two?’

‘As long as you like!’ Molly said, with a little laugh. ‘No one is likely to want them. They have all been out to try their

fortune except that one,' here she pointed to a fresh, clean, unfolded manuscript, 'and come back rejected. They have been to the "Argosy," and the "Cornhill," and the "Monthly Packet," but they were not approved.'

The old gentleman nodded, and began flattening out the papers: they had been rolled round rather carelessly.

'Good-night,' said Molly, retreating to the door.

It gave her a strange palpitating feeling to see her brain-children in the hands of a stranger. She felt something as an anxious mother does who places her darlings under the keen eyes of a physician.

'Good-night,' said Mr. Johnson, rising and shaking hands.

He opened the door for her politely,

and then went back to the papers, while Molly went downstairs and began to mend her mother's stockings. That usually distasteful occupation has its soothing moments.

Mr. Johnson, meanwhile, read the manuscripts through. Then he selected a couple, made them up into a package with a note from himself inside, put the parcel in his pocket, and, taking his hat, went out and posted it.

‘I think she will do,’ he murmured to himself. ‘I think she has got it, but we will see what Spielman says.’

CHAPTER V.

‘WHY, child, where is your mother?’ enquired Miss Leonard, of Molly as the girl entered the drawing-room at Mote Court the next evening alone. The two gentlemen were there already.

‘Mother sends her love, and she is so sorry not to come,’ Molly answered, ‘but she is not very well to-day. “She was rather afraid of the walk, lest she should be overtired.”’

‘I hope it is nothing much’ said Miss Leonard. Mrs. Scobell suffered from some weakness of the heart and often had little attacks of illness, but nothing apparently serious. She was always well again in a few days, and trotting about as usual.

‘No. I hope not!’ Molly spoke quietly, but there was a little anxious tone in her voice, and a slight furrow of care on her forehead. She felt vaguely uneasy about her mother, she could hardly say why, for Mrs. Scobell’s indisposition seemed of the slight and usual type, and there had been no sufficient reason for Molly to stay at home, though she would have preferred doing so. But when she proposed it, Mrs. Scobell was angry, and said rather than that, she would risk the walk and go herself. Afterwards remembering that vague

feeling Molly took it as the shadow that sometimes falls upon our spirit when evil hours are in store for us.

But the uncomfortable feeling passed off amid the pleasant genial talk. Miss Leonard remained oddly pleased at the discovery of this new relative. She made Mr. Johnson take the foot of the table, called him cousin, and indicated, in various ways, that he was a guest whom she wished to honour. He for his part was very well content to be so treated. He felt that his journey to Bembury was satisfactory, for if the old miller had proved but an unsympathetic uncle, here was a relative of whom he might be justly proud, and if he had failed in finding charming nephews and nieces among whom he could dispense his bounty, he had at least sat-

isfied himself he was free of ties who needed assistance, and yet had found in this fair girl who sat at his right hand a legitimate object for help, if he could persuade her to take it. That, no doubt, might be the difficulty, but still he might try. If only she would be unto him as a daughter, what a far brighter life might open for him. Then he glanced across at Maurice with an involuntary sigh, and a half pang of envy. If he, William Johnson, were only Maurice's age, what possibilities might lie before him.

Molly herself was a rather silent member of the party, for the conversation had turned on foreign travel, and she having never crossed the channel could not do much but listen. Maurice was telling of various adventures he had met with while

travelling out of the beaten tracks in southern Italy and in Sicily. He spoke well and could be amusing, and he was not ill-pleased to see that Molly was interested and was listening attentively, even asking questions about places of which she had read.

After the meal was over, they strolled in the gardens for a time, the gentlemen, not caring to remain alone with the wine, very soon joining them on the lawn. Then they returned to the drawing-room, where the sun was sending his last golden beams full upon the portrait of Lady Betty, lighting up the face almost as if with a smile. Molly went across to look up at the portrait, and Maurice followed her.

‘It is a wonderful face,’ he said. ‘It

holds in it the elements of the tragic. One seems to feel that the soul that looks through that mask was not meant for any ordinary or commonplace existence.'

'Yet her life probably had been commonplace,' answered Molly, 'it was only its close that makes us call it romantic, and that came from the accident of the history of the time in which she lived.'

'But that was the test of her nature. Isn't it just the impulses that stir us when placed in an unusual position, that show what we are made of? If she had not been of a generous, noble nature, she would not have thrown herself between the musket-balls and their victim. She might have been very sorry and unhappy, but she would not have sacrificed her life.'

Molly looked quickly up at Maurice for

a moment, while in her heart she felt a little ashamed. She had judged him to be conceited and selfish, and now she found him far more appreciative than she expected. Her eyes softened, and unconsciously her manner became more cordial.

‘Molly,’ called Miss Leonard just then, from the other side of the room, ‘will you not sing us something?’

Molly went obediently to the piano, which Maurice opened for her. Then he went back to his place from whence he could regard her. The change in her expression had not been unnoticed by him, and he felt happy that he had pleased her by his words, though he scarcely knew why they should have had such an effect. He sat there in the softening twilight by the open window, the figures of Miss Leo-

nard and Mr. Johnson a little dim at the further end of the room, the girl in her white dress at the piano; outside, the faint clouded sky, the darkening trees, the sweet scent stealing in from the roses, and the tall white lilies that were blooming in the garden-beds close by, the chill, fresh feel of the rising dew creeping into the evening air. Was it on such a night as this that poor Lady Betty had sought to save the poor young messenger, and had flown down the avenue there—now slumbrous and dark against the clear sky, weeping and wringing her hands. Just then, the report of a distant pistol shot in the evening stillness made him almost start, it might have been the report of the musket that slew the unhappy lady and the royalist youth, whom she sought to shield.

But he was aroused from his musing by the sound of Molly's voice. It surprised him, for it was not the mezzo he expected, but a clear sweet contralto, not powerful, but with a pathetic, sympathetic thrill in it. The song she had chosen was unknown to him, and as her singing had the unusual virtue of clear enunciation he heard every word.

‘ Just a handful of flowers
 Flung by the wayside to die,
Withered and spoiled by the hours,
 Bugloss as blue as the sky,
 Poppies, and grasses, catchfly !
 Alas ! thus faded they lie,
 Flung by the wayside to die.

‘ Just a handful of flowers,
 Why were they plucked from their place ?
Torn from the sunshine and showers,
 Robbed of their glory and grace,
 Left of their beauty no trace,
 Oh ! cruel ! thus them to deface,
 Why were they plucked from their place ?

‘Just a handful of flowers!
Just so—the love of a heart,
Gathered in bright careless hours,
Forgotten and cast by apart,
Killed with neglect’s bitter dart!
Alas! for the grief and the smart!
Alas! The slain love of a heart!’

‘That is a sentimental song for you, Molly,’ said Miss Leonard, smiling, ‘where did you pick it up?’

‘Yes, isn’t it,’ answered Molly, laughing, ‘but the words just fitted that old air that mother is so fond of. They appealed to me also, because I do so hate to see flowers picked and then flung away. It always makes me feel so angry and so sad, such cruel waste. But now, Miss Leonard, do play something yourself.’

There is always something pathetic about the playing of an elderly woman. As she sits before the keys of the piano,

the ghosts of the past rise up and cluster round her, echoes of other days, shadows of old hopes, loves, sorrows, disappointments, dreams, thoughts and aspirations. She was young and fair once, and those old airs, so faint, and thin, and faded now, were then full of sweetness and rapture—the dim eyes were bright, and other eyes sought their glances eagerly, the grey hair was golden, and the mouth not marked with tremulous lines of sadness. Surely the very music rang out differently when the thin white hands were plump and rounded, and the finger tips touched with a rose gleam. Is this why so many give up their music as the years pass on, because it is full of tears?

Miss Leonard had not given up her music when she left off youth and youth-

ful ways, but she never played modern music. Mendelssohn was her limit, but Mozart and Haydn, and above all Beethoven were her favourites. To-night she played a sonata of Dussek—the one that has an andante with a most plaintive ring in it, returning and returning like some one ever seeking, ever toiling upward, ever stretching forth a hand to grasp somewhat, which still ever lies beyond its reach. She played with a delicate precision not so common now-a-days as in the years that are past, and over her listeners there stole a mood not out of keeping with the quaint old room, the soft summer twilight, the dreamy memories of the past which always lingered about the atmosphere of the old house.

Maurice broke the spell of the sadness

when his turn came to perform. The very first chord he played with his firm, manly touch, seemed to disperse the hovering ghosts, and his clear baritone voice sent them trooping fast away. It was like a fresh salt sea breeze sweeping through an atmosphere heavy with the faint fragrance of lily blooms.

A DIVINE COMPACTION.

‘ Aphrodite gave the face
And the wonder of her grace,
Stately Pallas wisdom sent
For the Soul’s fair ornament,
Artemis her silvery cold
And the fearless spirit bold,
While Demeter, mother great,
Whispered of her lore of fate,
Eros, sulking, stood apart,
Jealous of the steadfast heart.
“ Wait, fair Boy, perchance some day
Thou shalt have thy part to play.” ’

Presently Molly tried to slip away unperceived by the gentlemen. She wanted

to get home to her mother, but they both protested that they would walk home with her; and after a little demur from Miss Leonard at their leaving so early, they started off. It was not quite ten o'clock, a still, cloudy night, but not dark, for the moon was near the full, and though hidden by clouds, her light was not unfelt.

‘Let us go down the lime avenue, and see if Lady Betty is out,’ said Maurice. ‘Isn’t it just about this time she walks, and it is just as near that way as the other. You are not afraid of ghosts are you, Miss Scobell? I am sure you would like to see one.’

‘I am not sure,’ answered Molly. ‘It would be interesting, no doubt, but still it might prove rather a fearful joy. However, I shan’t mind poor Lady Betty so

much as a perfectly strange phantom. She is like an old friend, to whom one won't require an introduction.'

'An introduction!' laughed Maurice. 'What a dreadful, worldly idea! Do you think we shall need introductions in the Spirit World? I had an idea that in Ghostland one would be in good society at once, and be able to converse with Shakespeare or Dante without having to overcome the bars that keep one now apart from the uplifted ones.'

'There will be assimilation there, you may be sure,'—it was Mr. Johnson who spoke now,—'true affinities will draw those together who correspond in sympathies. Here earthly gravitations interrupt and deflect the celestial currents.'

As he spoke, they turned from the direct

path to the principal gates down a grassy walk bordered with roses; not the tidy, trained standards of modern days, but great bushes growing almost wild, and now a mass of buds and blossoms, not so perfect individually, but giving the impression of luxuriant, unchecked, unrestrained vigour. They were old-fashioned roses, moss-roses, pink and white, monthly roses, cabbage-roses, damask roses, York and Lancaster roses, blooms that a modern gardener would regard with contempt, but yet by effect of natural grace and colour were beautiful. This walk led to the lime avenue in which legend reported Lady Betty was wont to walk when a restless fit seized her poor perturbed spirit.

The avenue was about thirty feet wide, its centre covered with fine soft turf. On

either side rose splendid lime-trees, which, untouched by sacrilegious shears, had fulfilled all their beauty. The lower branches swept fan-like over the grass, while the tall stems rose to the height of sixty to eighty feet. They were coming into blossom now soon, and the honey sweetness would perfume the night air.

Molly and her companions paused for a moment, gazing down the glade which the full-foliaged trees rendered very dark. As they stood there, a perfect silence brooded over everything. Not a sound was to be heard, not a movement broke the stillness, not a leaf stirred, and yet the silence was full of a strange mystery of unheard sound, as if any minute there might burst from the heart of it some ter-

rible cry ; no sound of soft music or song of woodland nymph, but some harsh and tragic discord. Some hunted creature fearing for life might be hiding there, dreading lest the loud beats of its labouring heart might betray it to the pursuer, and a wail of despair strike across the silence.

‘ How dark it is,’ whispered Molly under her breath, ‘ and—how strange !’

Almost unconsciously she drew a little nearer to Mr. Johnson, and he silently took her hand and drew it through his arm.

‘ Come,’ he said, cheerfully, ‘ I think we had better walk on. It looks to me as if it might rain soon.’

‘ Yes, do let us get home,’ said Molly, almost with a shudder. ‘ I feel as if some-

thing bad was going to happen. Something dreadful, I don't know what, and I do hate such presentiments.'

'But they seldom come true,' said Maurice.

'Ah! but they do sometimes,' rejoined Molly quickly. 'Hark! what's that!'

They had come a little way along the avenue, and their own footsteps, dulled on the turf, and the slight sweep of Molly's dress alone broke the dead stillness, till just as she spoke. Then a sharp crack as of some one stepping on dead wood, and a sudden rustle among the sweeping branches of the limes, was distinctly audible. They all stopped and peered in the direction from which the sound came, but it was so dark that whatever had caused the noise was quite invisible. Maurice

fancied he saw a dim form glide farther into the background, but it was so uncertain that he was unable to decide if the form were that of a man or a woman.

‘It isn’t the ghost, at any rate,’ he said aloud. ‘Ghosts are, I believe, immaterial, and have no weight wherewith to crack branches. Generally they only clank chains attached to their persons, which give forth dismal rattlings, by some spiritual methods, I presume.’

‘Come,’ said Mr. Johnson, who felt a sort of nervous trembling in Molly’s arm. ‘Come—let us go on. There is a heavy dew, and we shall all get the rheumatism, which is much the worst sort of ghost to meet, I can tell you.’

They all walked on quickly, and Mr. Johnson began to talk about a tour in

Norway, that he had made a year before ; and the eerie feeling had all faded away by the time they reached the town. But as they entered its street there was an air of bustle and excitement that was unusual, even for Saturday night. It was nearly half-past ten now, and usually at that hour everyone was abed and asleep, but this night there were still many people about—some of the shops were only just putting up their shutters, and men were gathered together in knots, talking over some news or event which seemed to interest them much. In passing one such group Molly fancied she heard the name of Scobell mentioned, and she was more confirmed in the idea, as the man who was speaking, turning suddenly and see-

ing her by the light of the gas-lamp under which he and his companions stood, suddenly paused in his talk, and touched his hat to her in a shy, shame-faced sort of way. It was the sexton of the church, who had known her all her life.

When they reached home the door was opened so very quickly that Molly felt sure Patty had been peeping out, and keeping watch for her. A vague kind of fear crept into her heart as she looked at the little maiden's round eyes and excited air. Something had happened—something—she knew not what—something bad, of course, and it concerned her or hers. The fear grew more certain, and clutched with cold fingers at her heart.

‘What is the matter, Patty?’ she said,

as soon as Mr. Johnson had said 'good-night,' and gone to his rooms. 'How is my mother?'

'She's middlin', miss, but she got disturbed like at the noise outside, and the people going past.'

'What noise? What people?'

'Oh, miss, haven't you heard? Mr. Dodd, the detective gentleman, has been murdered.'

'Murdered!'

'Yes, miss—at least, not murdered quite dead, but shot at; and they found him on the road, and brought him in on a gate, and Mr. Holford is with him.'

'But how was it? How did it happen? Who shot at him?'

'Some 'un from London, they says, miss,' said the girl, suddenly dropping her

eyes, and twiddling the corner of her apron in an odd, awkward way. 'But I can hear missis callin', miss.'

Molly ran upstairs with a strange, disturbed feeling at her heart. It was a shocking thing, of course, that poor Dodd should have been shot at and wounded, but still it could have nothing to do with them personally. How could it? And yet her heart had sunk at those words 'from London' in the strangest, sickliest manner. She went into her mother's room, and found the poor little lady restless and fluttered, with shortened breath and nervous movements.

'Oh, Molly, I am so glad you have come,' she cried. 'I have been so frightened and disturbed by the noise in the street. And—oh! child—I can't help thinking about

Ralph, and worrying about him. It is a long time since he wrote.'

Ralph ! It was the very name that was in Molly's thoughts ; but then, if anything went wrong anywhere, their thoughts always went to Ralph, as if he must inevitably be mixed up with everything that was painful or disagreeable.

'Well, mother,' said Molly, in a reassuring voice, which very much belied her inward uneasiness, 'we know that, when we don't hear from Ralph, he is getting along pretty well. He is certain to write if he is in a scrape, which is a sort of comfort, because one feels sure one knows the worst. No news is always good news with him. But, now, you must try to lie still and go to sleep. I shall give you a dose of your sleeping-medicine to-

night, for you have got worried and nervous by being left to yourself.'

Soon the house was quite still. Patty was off to bed, and Molly soon heard Mr. Johnson go to his rooms. She sat by her mother's side till she saw the soothing medicine which the doctor always prescribed in these attacks had taken effect, and that she had sunk into a quiet sleep. It was all still outside now, for the public-houses had closed their doors, and their frequenters had gone noisily home. Only the steady tramp of the policeman might be heard coming along the paved street, warning everyone of his approach in a manner that must be very comforting and helpful to such as wish to avoid his notice. When all was quite quiet, and Molly heard the slow notes of the church clock chiming

out twelve, she crept away to her own room, which opened out of her mother's, leaving the door of communication open between them, so that she might hear if her mother waked and wanted anything in the night.

She was very tired, but yet she could not sleep. The evening's amusement, quiet as it had been, was a great event in Molly's quiet life, and she went over in her mind all that had been talked about and discussed at the dinner-table. Then she could not help wondering what Mr. Johnson had thought of the manuscripts which she had given him. He had not spoken a word about them, but then he had had no opportunity of conversing with her alone ! Was that the reason of his silence, or was it that they were too bad for any notice to

be taken of them, or, being of a kind nature, he was hesitating before he told her they were nothing but rubbish, and bid her burn them and go and mend her stockings. That was what people mostly said to women who sought to obtain more scope and freedom in work, she believed. But mending stockings would bring in no money to pay the rent, nor, alas ! to buy new stockings when the old ones would bear mending no longer. That is where so much masculine advice fails ! Woman's sphere is home, they say, and they exalt that sphere and greatly praise it, and so think they have settled the question most satisfactorily, forgetting that the homes are few and the women many, that thousands must go out and strive in that battle of the world, for which they say the feminine nature is so

unfitted—or else starve to death. Some curious statistics might come to light, if it could be discovered how many of these hardly-spoken-of women help to maintain, not only themselves, but fathers and brothers, and perhaps even more, the children of such impecunious male relations. The graces and joys of home and motherhood, which the male writers in reviews so greatly extol, are very likely charming and beautiful, but such words are as mockery to the thousands on thousands for whom such joys are impossible, who must struggle for bread, or starve, and yet who have the illogical feeling in their rebellious breasts that they have as much right to life and food, as the men who cheat and oppress them, and then sneer at them as ‘surplus population.’

Some such restless thoughts as these were surging through Molly's brain as she lay sleepless on her bed, listening now and then to make sure that her mother was quietly asleep, and then falling into her meditations again. But her heart softened very much as she thought of Mr. Johnson. How kind he was! No, he would not, he did not despise her. He had such kind eyes that looked at her so gently. He might tell her that she was mistaken in thinking she had a vocation for literature, but he would do so kindly, not contemptuously, and he would understand that it was necessary for her to earn money in some way. He seemed to her a sort of revelation. All men perhaps were not arrogant or evil. She never once thought of Maurice Driver, although that young

gentleman was thinking a good deal of her, and would have been immensely surprised if he could have known how entirely his thoughts were unreciprocated. But while she was lying thus wide awake on her bed, a sudden slight sound aroused her. She started up to a sitting posture, and listened. Did it come from her mother's room? No. She could hear Mrs. Scobell's regular quiet breathing! There—it came again! It was some small missile rattling against her window, not a dash of rain, or the tapping of an ivy spray, but something hard like a shower of small pebbles or gravel. It came again, even as she recognised what it was! Some one wanted to attract her attention, to arouse her cautiously, and with her heart beating fast, while a terrible fear clutched her, she

sprang out of bed, and opening softly the lattice window put out her head to see what it was. It was only half dark, for the moon was gleaming mistily among the mottled clouds, but she could see no one at first.

‘Who is there?’ she called out, in a low voice.

‘Hush!’ came a muffled whisper rising up from a thick bed of shrubs under the window. ‘Hush! don’t make a row, but come down and speak to me.’

‘You, Ralph!’

‘Yes,’ answered the voice, as impatiently as a cautious whisper could be. ‘Come down, Molly, be as quiet as a mouse. Yes—it is Ralph of course!’

‘Ralph of course!’ murmured Molly to herself, as she drew in her head. ‘Who

should it be *but* Ralph.' She slipped on her dressing-gown, and then peeped in at her mother. No, fortunately she was not disturbed; she was sleeping quite placidly, her pale face faintly illuminated by the light from the night-lamp, yet even then, in all her sudden dread and terror, the girl was struck by the suffering, worn look on the features. Poor little mother!—the girl's eyes filled with tears, and a sob rose in her throat, as she softly closed the door between the two rooms, so as to try and prevent any sound from disturbing her. Poor little mother! Molly's heart swelled as she thought of the sorrowful life she had led hitherto, and the heavier woe which might be preparing for her. What it was that could oblige Ralph to come thus in the dead of night she did not yet

know, but that it meant terrible trouble for him and for them, she could not doubt.

She stole downstairs with her bare feet, her slippers in her hand, but afraid to put them on till she got into the little kitchen with its brick floor. She softly unbolted the door leading into the garden, a dreadful pang of dread shooting through her heart, as one of the bolts screamed and jarred in its sockets, and in a minute or two a form emerged from the shrubs and softly entered the kitchen.

It was her brother Ralph. He was a young fellow about twenty-four years of age, but he looked older from the lines of dissipation about his face. His hair was dark, and grew rather low on his forehead, and his eyes were large and brown and well-shaped, but with a hard expression.

His features were fairly good, and at a cursory glance many people might have called him handsome. He was not tall, but well proportioned, and had a sort of ease and grace of movement which was not without its attraction.

Molly had lit a candle, by its light she saw that her brother's face was ghastly white. His clothes were soiled and damp with the heavy dew off the shrubs among which he had been crouching. His eyes looked dim and hollow, and there was a nervous twitching about his mouth.

‘Give me something to eat, Molly,’ were his first words, as he flung himself into a chair and leant his arms heavily on the table, ‘and a glass of beer. I’m starving.’

‘I can’t give you any beer,’ she replied.

‘ We have none in the house. We can’t afford it.’

‘ Hang it—some wine—I’m fainting.’

‘ If we can’t afford beer, is it likely we can buy wine?’ she answered; ‘ but stay, I think there is a little whisky left.’

She went away, and soon returned with a bottle and a wine-glass which Ralph filled with the contents of the bottle and drank it off at a gulp. Molly then went to the larder and fetched some bread and cheese and a small joint of cold meat, and set the food before him. He ate ravenously. She did not speak to him, but sat still watching him, her face as white as his, her small hands clenched tightly over one another, her mind full of terrible apprehension and anguish.

At last his appetite seemed satisfied.

He put down his knife and fork, drank off another glass of whisky, and then thrust his hands deep down into his trousers pockets.

‘I am in a deuce of a hole, Moll!’ he said, speaking in a low, cautious voice.

‘So I imagine,’ she returned, in the same prudent tone. ‘What is the matter? What have you been doing? Have you had anything to do with shooting this poor man?’

‘Oh! you have heard, have you?’ he said. ‘Queer how you women always pick up gossip.’

Molly’s pale cheek flushed for a moment, and she was about to give a quick answer, and then she recollected herself and desisted.

‘Then it is true,’ she replied. ‘You did shoot him!’

‘What a little spitfire you are!’ he began, but then his voice changed to a sort of whine. ‘You are always so hard on me. You might be sorry for your brother, Molly—and try to help him—any other sister would!’

‘I am sorry for you, Ralph,’ she replied, with a quiver in her voice. ‘More sorry than I can tell you, and of course I will do all I can to help you. But I must know what it is—tell me, did you shoot the man?’

‘Is he dead?’ Ralph spoke, in a trembling whisper, and Molly saw the beads of perspiration gathering on his forehead. ‘By my soul, Molly, I didn’t mean to hurt

him. I just pulled out my revolver to frighten him a bit, and make him hook it, and somehow it went off. I saw him fall, and then I knew there would be a row, so I took to my heels. Molly,' he began to tremble as he spoke, and he put out his hand and clutched his sister's arm, 'Molly, if he dies—and they catch me—do you think—will they hang me?'

His white lips quivered so that he could hardly pronounce the words, and Molly stared at him, as white and trembling as he. She caught the edge of the table to steady herself, and by a great effort shook from her the feeling of faintness and horror that was stealing over her. It would never do for her to give way! For Ralph's sake, for her mother's sake, she

must be brave, and keep her mind clear and firm.

‘Ralph,’ she said. ‘You must tell me all about it! I can’t help you unless I understand. What were you doing here at all? Was the policeman going after you?’

‘It was only a little money,’ he said, sullenly. ‘I didn’t mean to keep it. I only borrowed it just till the Derby, and it would have been all right if Philotethes had won. He ought to have won, Molly, I assure you. He was safe, and it was just a fraud. But then the boss found it out, and I hooked it. Well, I thought I would just run down here and see you and mother, you know, and somehow they guessed it, and wired the fellows here to

nab me. I don't know how they came to know mother lived here. But now it is all up, and if I can't get off they'll hang me. You have always been as hard as nails upon me, Molly, but I don't think you'll stand quiet and see me hung.'

'Never mind me,' said Molly. 'Go on, Ralph; where did you meet Dodd?'

'Well, I came along here and hung about, and found you were out, and mother upstairs. Is she ill, Molly?'

'Yes. She is ill. She had one of her attacks yesterday.'

'Yes; well, I guessed you would be up with Miss Leonard, so I started off round by the fields, and was just cutting down Farmer Duck's Lane when I met Dodd. Well—as I tell you, I pulled out my revolver and it went off, and then I knew

there would be a pretty kettle of fish. But I felt I must see you, so I hid about in the avenue. I wanted to catch you going home, but you had two chaps with you. Who are they, Molly ?'

'They are friends of Miss Leonard's. One of them—Mr. Johnson—is lodging here.'

'The deuce he is!' Ralph sank his voice a little lower before he continued his narration. 'I hope he is a good sleeper. Well, of course I couldn't speak then, so when all was quiet I came round the back way. It was darker then, and the moon nearer setting, so I thought it would be safe. And now, Molly, if you don't want to see me hung, you must give me some money, and I'll be off. I can cut across country towards Southampton

or Portsmouth, or somewhere, and get out of the country. I'll get over to South America; they won't catch me there, and that's the place for a fellow to get on.'

'But, Ralph, Ralph!' Molly clasped her hands in despair, 'we have no money—scarcely a pound in the house.'

'No money? nonsense! You don't expect me to believe that. Old Beadon must have paid you your salary last week. I know well enough when the money was due, and you can't have spent five pounds in a week in this old hole of a place.'

'He hasn't paid me a penny yet. He only paid half my salary the quarter before, and I don't know when I shall get it. You know he never remembers it. We have had a week's money from Mr. Johnson, but then we had to buy things

for him, and we had to pay the quarter's rent yesterday. I don't believe mother has as much as eighteen shillings left in the house !'

Ralph sat staring blankly at her. Even in her trouble and excitement, Molly could not fail to notice how much the last three years in London had altered him. His dissipated life was destroying even the outline of his features, as it had long ago destroyed any beauty of expression his face might once have possessed. Now, jaded with fatigue, dirty, cold, and miserable, he looked the wreck of his former self.

'But I must have money,' he exclaimed, with an oath. 'I am not going to stay here and be caught like a mouse in a trap, and swing for that detective fellow, and I can't

get away without any tin. That's how the coves are caught! You go sneaking around looking shabby, the police are down on you at once; but go first class, like a swell, and you may smoke your cigarette under the nose of any chap from Scotland yard itself. Look here, Moll, you have got a lot of money in the Savings Bank. I must have that!

This was a chance shot. Ralph did not know for certain of his sister's savings, but he remembered he had once caught a glimpse of a Post Office Savings Bank book. He had a keen scent after money.

‘But I cannot get it to-night,’ answered Molly.

It was true that she had twenty pounds in the bank, though she had never revealed the fact to Ralph. Those twenty pounds

amounted to the savings of her whole life, begun before she had earned anything for herself, but sometimes had a stray shilling or half-crown given to her, added to through the sternest self-denial. She had thought that some day she might see an opening in life when a few pounds might help her to grasp some opportunity of improving her position, but now this hardly-earned sum must go, as everything else went, to help Ralph out of this or that terrible scrape. She thought for a moment mournfully of her own hopes and intentions, but she never dreamed of refusing it to him. He must have it, he said, and of course he must. Did he not have everything, by a sort of natural law, which she no more thought of rebelling against than of trying to alter the course of nature.

He must have it, as he had had everything else, if she could only get it.

‘Not get it to-night,’ he said, roughly, in answer to her speech, ‘but I must have it to-night, or to-morrow at least. I suppose it is not more than fifty pounds, but I must try to make that do.’

‘It is certainly not more than fifty pounds, nor half as much,’ Molly replied, quietly.

‘Not fifty! Hang it. You must have been precious extravagant then, not to save more, living here at home for nothing. Well, how much is it?’

‘It is twenty.’ Molly said nothing in reply to his taunt about extravagance. She knew of old there was no reasoning with Ralph, and explanations were waste of breath. If he chose to think a thing

and say it, he stuck to it, however facts might tell against it. She had got to look upon this peculiarity as one belonging to mankind, by virtue of their sex. 'But you know as well as I do, Ralph, that I must write for it, and wait the reply. I can't possibly get the order back till Tuesday or Wednesday.'

'Wednesday! What a fool you are, Moll! I shall be nabbed long before Wednesday, if I stay here. Can't you borrow it from Miss Leonard? She is awfully fond of you!'

'She would not lend it me unless I told her what it was for, and if I did, I know she would not give it me. She has often blamed mother for giving you money!'

'The old cat!' muttered Ralph.

Molly sat silent for a little while think-

ing of various possibilities and methods of getting this money. Perhaps, though Miss Leonard would not lend her the money, Mr. Johnson would. She could show him the book as proof that she possessed it, and it would be only two days before she could repay him. Surely he would not mind lending it to her for two days? It would be terrible, the asking him to do it, but the whole state of affairs was so dreadful that she could not stay on that account.

‘I will try if I can get it,’ she said at last. ‘But if I do, how am I to give it to you? They will be sure to watch the house here, and it will not be safe for you to come.’

‘I will hide about at Mote Court,’ he answered. ‘There is a loose heap of hay

round by the Home Farm there where you can creep right in, and be hidden as safe as the old chap—what's his name?—in the oak-tree. Then you come along up the avenue after dark. They will only think you are going to see the old lady, and besides, if anyone did see us, they would most likely think you were Lady Betty. The country folks do funk the place after dark, you know. And, besides, the fellows will be sure to think I have bolted off somewhere. They will never expect me to stay here.'

Molly felt there was some truth in the latter remark.

'Very well,' she said, after some consideration. 'We may manage so. If I can get the money, I will come, Ralph.'

'All right,' he said. 'I will be on the

look-out. But I say, Moll—I am dead tired. I think I will go to sleep on the sofa in the parlour for an hour. I can get away then before it is really light, though the nights are so beastly short now, and——’

‘But, Ralph,’ she interrupted, alarmed at his staying.

‘Oh, bother!’ he answered, impatiently. ‘I tell you I couldn’t walk back, I should drop by the way. It is just a quarter-past one. Well, I’ll sleep till three. You can wake me then.’

He got up as he spoke and went out of the kitchen, feeling his way softly into the parlour.

Molly followed him. The room was dimly lighted by the moonbeams which came in through the white blind of the

window, and the position of the furniture was faintly visible. She dared not bring in the candle, for the window faced the street, and a light at such an hour might be observed, and give rise to surmises. The police, she felt sure, would be on the watch. Almost before she could speak again, Ralph had flung himself on the old-fashioned horsehair sofa, and was soon asleep.

It was no use talking to him. She took a knitted rug which lay there, and covered him with it. Then she went back into the kitchen, moving softly and noiselessly, and put away the food, being careful to leave no trace of the night's proceedings that might arouse Patty's curiosity, and trusting that she would not notice the sudden diminution in the quantity of the provi-

sions. Afterwards she put out the light, fearful of prying eyes, and then stole upstairs to her mother's room, to see if she had been at all disturbed, but she was still sleeping tranquilly, thanks to the medicine. So she crept down into the parlour, where the weary figure was slumbering. He had turned a little in his sleep, so that what faint light there was fell upon his face, making the features just distinguishable.

Molly looked at him with that strange mingling of feelings with which we regard those who are so dear and near to us, and yet are such a burden and a grief. Such a mingling of love and abhorrence, such anger and such pity, such yearning affection and such bitterness, that the heart is

torn to pieces by the contrary emotions. This handsome, well-grown man, who ought to have been the stay and support of his widowed mother, and yet was only her bane and grief. This boy, who had been Molly's own childish companion, with whom she had played and quarrelled, and made it up again, and always given way to all those early years. And now there he lay—a hunted criminal, perhaps a murderer, at any rate an outcast, and a fugitive from justice. A wasted life, a degraded soul, ruined almost before he had reached the fulness of manhood.

As she sat there, she began to realise the extent of the woe that had overtaken them, the hopelessness of the tragedy that was thus intruded into their quiet lives.

All that had gone before was as nothing to this. Those troubles were heavy but not irretrievable. Hope had been left them, but now its faintest glimmer was taken away. All their life long she and her mother and Ralph himself would have to carry this weight. The heavy, bitter tears of utter anguish, cruel as blood-drops drawn from the heart itself, dropped slowly down her cheeks, as the extent of their misery pressed in upon her consciousness. It was a vigil never to be forgotten as long as life might last.

But she could not sit there long. As the dawn began to appear, and another light than moonlight made visible the oblong lines of the window, she crept upstairs again, and, finding an old bag,

packed it with a few articles of clothing that Ralph had left behind him on his last visit home, and then bringing it down, with a clean shirt and collar, she made her brother wash off the travel stains and make himself neat. She blacked and polished his boots with her own hands, and then as the grey cast grew lighter she urged him to be gone. But he hesitated a moment, some softening touch, some remembrance of old days had moved his heart a little.

‘I say, Moll,’ he whispered, ‘can’t I just say a word to mother? I may be gone a precious long time.’

‘I’m afraid to wake her,’ said Molly. ‘It would be dangerous at any time after she has taken that medicine, and if she

saw you and heard all about it suddenly it might kill her. Oh! Ralph, I don't know what to do. It will nearly break her heart if you are gone away without seeing her; but if she is startled——'

'Well, look here. I might just go upstairs and see her—and—and you can tell her, you know.'

Molly turned and led the way, and Ralph followed her in his stocking feet. He crept into the room where his mother lay, and, standing by the bed, looked down on the worn, thin, white face on the pillow. The poor lady looked more pallid than ever in the cold, grey, dawning light, and something smote on her son's heart, and a sort of sob burst from him. The sound slightly stirred the sleeper, and

Molly laid a warning hand on her brother's arm. He shook it off with an impatient movement, and, stooping down, very lightly kissed his mother's cheek. She moved in her sleep but did not wake, only a sort of half smile came over her face, and she murmured something in her sleep. That kiss and smile were afterwards strangely precious to Molly, but now she was too terrified to realise all they meant. She got her brother away downstairs, and watched him creep away through the garden in the still dim light, promising to meet him that evening in the Ghost's Avenue, and bring him what money she could procure. Then, after obliterating every trace of his presence, she went again to her own room, lay down on her bed, so

worn out and tired that, in spite of all her trouble, she fell asleep, and slept heavily till Patty came in to her in the morning, wondering at her young mistress's non-appearance.

CHAPTER VI.

MOLLY found her mother awake and free from pain, when she went into her room, but very weak and low, and she hastened to get the cup of tea the poor lady asked for, by aid of the little spirit-lamp she always kept for such needs, and then dressed and went downstairs. There she found Patty standing by the kitchen-table, contemplating the loaf which she had just fetched from the larder.

‘Law ! Miss Molly,’ said Patty, ‘there seems a lot gone. I really didn’t think I ate so much at supper.’

‘Oh ! no,’ said Molly, pretending to laugh a little. ‘I cut some off after you had gone to bed last night.’

‘There now,’ said Patty, ‘I thought I couldn’t have ate so much as that ! And oh ! miss, Mr. Farley was here just now, and he wants to see you presently.’

Molly’s heart sank. Mr. Farley was chief of the police in Bembury.

‘Mr. Farley,’ she said, trying to speak in a surprised tone. ‘Dear me ! what did he want ?’

Patty gave her young mistress a quick shy look, and then turned her head away, and went on toasting a slice of bread at the fire.

‘ He wanted to see missis,’ Patty replied, assiduously gazing at one corner of her piece of toast, to see if it were sufficiently browned, ‘ but I told him as how she was ill, and so he said as he would wish to speak to you. And he wanted to know if anybody had been here yesterday evenin’ to see you, and I said no, and as how you had been up at Miss Leonard’s, and come home with Mr. Johnson, and that I was sure nobody had been, and that you were sound asleep when I called you, because—because he asked if you were—well,—worritted like, and I said, “ No, not a bit.” ’

Molly stood perfectly still, gazing at Patty. She saw the girl knew or suspected something, and in a moment she decided to trust her with all, to make her an ally.

It was the only wise course, perhaps the only possible course.

‘Patty,’ she said, in a whisper, ‘did you—did you ask him about—the man—the man who was—shot?’

Patty dropped her toast and came close to her young mistress. In a moment she divined that there was to be confidence between them.

‘Yes,’ she answered, in a low tone, ‘I asked just careless like how he was, and he said he was better. He was only just shot in the shoulder, and they took out the shot, and he was doin’ well. There warn’t no murder done, he says—that was one blessin’.’

‘Patty,’ again Molly whispered, as she caught the girl’s arm, ‘did you hear—did anybody say——’

She could not get any farther, but the girl understood the question in her eyes.

‘They say ’twas Mr. Ralph,’ she said, under her breath, ‘but don’t you fret, miss. It ain’t murder, anyways, even if they do ketch him, and p’raps they won’t do that.’

‘You won’t say a word to mother,’ implored Molly, ‘it would kill her.’

‘Trust me, miss,’ said Patty, proudly. ‘I won’t say one sillybill to her, nor to no one else. Wild elifants shan’t drag it out of me. And now, miss, just sit down and get yer breakfast, and I’ll take in Mr. Johnson’s. There’s his bell.’

Molly sat down and tried to eat her breakfast, but not very successfully. She was thinking too much of all that lay

before her that morning. First of the interview with the inspector, then of her appeal to Mr. Johnson, then of the more difficult and dangerous task of meeting her brother in the evening. At first a weary confusion seemed to fill her brain, a bewilderment of trouble, and a sense that she was struggling in the midst of dangers and sorrows that must in the end overwhelm her. But, after a few minutes, she pulled herself together, and tried to force her mind to decide on some clear course. She had a large resource of pluck in her nature, of good, clear common-sense, and of that quality of determination or power that rises up to meet and overcome adverse circumstances, and is not to be borne down or crushed by them. One thing at a time, she thought, and the first

thing was this interview with the inspector. Of course, the first thing would be that he would try to find out from her where Ralph was.

Could she so fence with him as to evade admitting the fact that Ralph had been there, and could she do it without sinking into the degradation of falsehood? That was the bitter thought. Happiness, prosperity, hope, money, all might be trampled under foot, but must she sacrifice her own personal truth, self-respect. It was inexpressibly dreadful, and yet Molly knew that if some such subterfuge were necessary to save her brother from public trial and a prison, she would be obliged to use it. For her mother's sake she must do it—yes, for her mother's sake.

Just then her mother's bell rang sharply,

and Molly was obliged to go up at once. She found her sitting up in bed, looking terribly distressed, and gasping for breath.

‘What—is it—Molly? What—has—he done!’ she cried. ‘It is Ralph—I am sure it is Ralph they are talking about. Oh! what has that unhappy boy done now?’

Molly ran to her, and put her arms round her.

‘Why, mother dear!’ she said, soothingly. ‘What is the matter? What makes you think there is anything wrong with Ralph?’

‘I heard some one talking outside,’ said Mrs. Scobell, pointing to the window which was open a little way, and was not so very many feet above the narrow footpath of the High Street. ‘I heard

them say that it was a near shave of murder, and then another man said something about that young Scobell always being a scamp. Then the first voice said, "Hush!—his mother lives here," and they moved on. Oh! Molly, tell me. I see by your face that you know all about it.'

'Oh! mother, mother,' sobbed Molly, 'I hoped to spare you this!'

'It is true—it is true! Tell me, child. I must know the worst!'

'I don't quite understand it,' said Molly, controlling her tears, 'but Ralph has been betting on the races, and lost, and he took money he ought not to have touched, and then he could not pay it back again. So he seems to have run away, and it was suspected he had come here, and they sent Dods, the detective, out to catch him, and

Ralph had a pistol with him, and he pulled it out. He says he didn't mean to shoot the man, and I am sure he did not. He only meant to frighten him, but it went off in the struggle, and at first he thought he had killed the man, but really it seems he only wounded him in the shoulder.'

'Have you seen Ralph, Molly?'

'Yes.' Molly lowered her voice to a whisper. 'He came here last night—in the middle of the night—and told me.'

'Why did you not bring him to me?'

'He did come up, and kissed you, mother, in your sleep, but I dared not rouse you up after the medicine.'

'Oh! my poor boy, my poor, unfortunate boy,' wailed the mother. 'Molly, I must see him—I must see him. Oh! it was

cruel of you not to wake me. I must see him !’

‘ No, mother,’ said Molly, firmly. ‘ He must *not* come here. Think of the danger ! I am going to find him this evening in the avenue in Mote Court. He has no money, and I must take him some.’

‘ Money—but we have none !’

‘ There are my twenty pounds in the Post Office. I am going to ask Mr. Johnson to lend me the money till Wednesday.’

‘ Mr. Johnson !’

‘ There is no one else. I dare not ask Miss Leonard, for if she knew it was for Ralph, she would not let me have it !’

‘ Hark, what bell is that ?’ suddenly cried the poor lady. ‘ It is the front door

bell—who is it—oh, Molly, who is it?’

‘Hush, mother, hush. You must try and keep calm, or you will be ill again, and then how shall I help Ralph?’

‘It is a man’s voice,’ whispered poor Mrs. Scobell. ‘Oh! Molly, who is it?’ She clung to her daughter as she spoke, trembling, and Molly could feel the hurried, labouring, irregular beating of that frail heart.

‘It is only the inspector,’ said Molly, trying to speak calmly and reassuringly. ‘He has been here this morning, questioning Patty, but she knows nothing, and if she did she wouldn’t tell. She is as true as steel.’

‘But you—oh! Molly—you won’t,’ Mrs. Scobell looked imploringly at her, ‘you

won't say anything—oh, remember after all he is your brother!’

Molly knew what she meant well enough.

‘Don't be too particular, Molly,’ her mother would have said, if she could have got the words out, ‘don't stickle too much for the exact truth. Save the poor, unhappy boy from this last worst thing if you can.’

It was a bitter moment. As Molly went slowly downstairs, she felt she was making the last sacrifice anyone could be called upon to make—the sacrifice of her own personal truth. And yet she knew she would make it. She could not put the police on the track of her brother. She might avoid telling a direct lie, but her

intention would be to deceive. What did it matter about words when a falsehood, a deceit had to be acted? To act a lie was as bad in heaven's sight as to tell one. And such a lie would be a sin she could never get rid of, because she could not repent of it by-and-by, knowing that she had done it of set purpose, and, if it had to be repeated, that she would repeat it.

And this she was called upon to do for the sake of a ne'er-do-well, good-for-nothing, selfish boy, who had never been anything but a trouble and disgrace to them, and who would never be anything else but a trouble and disgrace! Why should she do it? Why not give it up, and wash her hands of the matter? She paused a moment on the staircase, gazing

out of a back window into the flowery, untidy garden, where the sunshine fell brightly on the little grass-plot all dappled with daisies and buttercups among the fresh, growing green grass, and on the big old white rose-bush full of buds, and on the fox-gloves growing tall now, and just showing their rows of pink bells. The birds were singing cheerily, with that *abandon* of joy and happiness which seems to fill their little breasts in early summer; some one was playing a hymn-tune a little way further up the street; the black cat, Pluto, was sunning his handsome person on the gravel-walk. All outside looked so cheerful, so bright, so tranquil, and yet she was so miserable.

It is hard to be young and wretched: older people get used to the darker aspects

of life, but when the young soul is called to face a grief or calamity which even its experience tells it can never be entirely recovered from, but must be a life-long trouble, it has a dark time indeed. Can life be lived with this shadow always dark at one's side, or this burden always lying on the shoulders? 'It is impossible,' is the answer—not knowing how used it must grow to such companion-shadows, or how the back fits itself to the burden! And so Molly rebelled against her fate, and just at this moment the rebellious spirit almost gained the mastery.

Almost, but not quite! She stood still looking out at the sweet brightness of that June Sunday, the hot tears in her eyes, her hands clenched together; and then the thought of her mother's imploring

face came back to her, and she crushed back her rebellion into that dark cupboard in our hearts where we keep such naughty bogies tight fastened in, and went downstairs, the demure, quiet young woman that Bembury imagined her to be.

Mr. Farley had been shown into the little dining-parlour, and was sitting on the very sofa where the young man, whom he would have given a good deal to have had in custody, had been sleeping but an hour or two before. He was a tall, portly man, rather red in the face, with an air of conscious importance about him. He looked as if he knew he had a reputation to support, and meant to support it well. And it was true that he was possessed of a great reputation locally. Everyone in Bembury had a profound belief in Mr.

Farley's sagacity and wisdom. Clever must be the malefactor who escaped him! He exercised an Argus-eyed watch over Bembury and the neighbourhood, as far as his charge extended. He was reported to know every London burglar or evil-doer by sight, and if he caught a glimpse of such an one polluting the streets of his town that person was warned to retire before he had had the smallest opportunity of using his skill on the innocent Bemburians.

Molly knew all this very well, and felt she had little chance against such astuteness; but she had resolved on her course of action, and must do the best she could. But she had one advantage, on which she did not reckon. Mr. Farley was a keen officer, and proud of his position, feeling

his responsibility and most anxious to fulfil it properly; but, after all, he was but a man, and as such had a soft place in his heart for a pretty girl. Moreover, he was a Bembury man, and knew and liked both Mrs. Scobell and her daughter, and pitied them, too, because of this wretched boy who was their bane. So when Molly came into the room looking so grave and pale, and yet so pretty, a kind of remorse began to gather in Mr. Farley's heart at the work he had to do. He felt his weakness, too, and almost wished he had sent Jenkins instead of coming himself. Jenkins was a Londoner, as hard as nails, and with no sentimentalities about him. However, it was too late now.'

'Good-morning, Miss Scobell,' said Mr.

Farley, rising from the sofa, which creaked almost pathetically as it was relieved of his weight. 'Good-morning. I am sorry to hear that Mrs. Scobell is not well. I wanted rather to see her.'

'I am sorry, but you cannot see her this morning,' said Molly, quietly. 'She is very poorly and is in bed. She had one of her attacks yesterday.'

'Oh! I am sorry to hear it. I am afraid you must have had some bad news, and that brought it on.'

'No,' said Molly, quite truthfully. 'No, we had no bad news yesterday morning. I don't know what caused it. I fancy it is the changes in the weather.'

'But I am afraid you have had bad news since,' he retorted, quickly.

‘What makes you think so?’ said Molly, quietly.

She looked straight in Mr. Farley’s face as she spoke with a grave, steady gaze which half-disconcerted, half-amused him.

‘She means fight,’ he thought to himself. ‘By Jove! she is a well plucked one.’

‘Well,’ he answered, after a moment’s pause, ‘I suppose the reason that makes me think so is because I have had bad news which I know will concern you much, and I thought probably you had heard of it. When did you see your brother last?’ he added, quickly, turning sharp round and facing Molly, who had seated herself a little to one side of him.

There was a minute’s pause. Molly

had grown perceptibly paler, but her eyes kept their steady look, and her hands were clasped firmly together.

‘Mr. Farley,’ she said at last, ‘will you tell me one thing? Am I obliged—have you a legal right to force me to answer your questions?’

‘A legal right? Well—perhaps not quite that! But it might be better for you just to answer my questions.’

‘Better! Yes; but for whom would it be better?’

‘Have you heard,’ Mr. Farley spoke sharply in a severe, authoritative voice, ‘that your brother has shot at and wounded an officer of justice while the latter was doing his duty?’

Molly sat quite silent. She neither spoke nor moved.

‘Now, my dear,’ Mr. Farley fell back to his former gentle, persuasive tone, ‘you see it is no use denying the facts. Dods is quite sensible, and he knows who shot him perfectly. Now it is naturally supposed your brother came here in order to see you before flying the country. Now I have a search-warrant in my pocket at this moment, but I don’t want to do anything that would be disagreeable or painful to so old and respected a neighbour as your mother. I know you have always been a young lady quite above any falsehood or deceit,’—here Mr. Farley looked impressively at Molly,—‘and if you will give me your word that your brother is not in the house, or anywhere about the premises, and will also tell me when you last saw him, I will not use that warrant.’

Molly thought a minute, while a faint gleam of amusement flashed through her mind at Mr. Farley's little attempt at bargaining and flattery. Yet she was grateful for the consideration and sympathy which he could not conceal.

‘Mr. Farley,’ she said, ‘I am sure you are most kind and considerate, but, if you like to look over the house, you are quite welcome to do so. I suppose you won't need to go into the rooms which Mr. Johnson our lodger is using? I assure you Ralph is not in them.’

‘I would like to see your brother's room, at any rate,’ said Farley.

He felt sure Ralph was not in the house then, but he wanted to see if he could detect any signs of his having been there.

Molly without another word led him

upstairs into the bed-room which had been Ralph's. It showed no sign of recent occupation—the bed was covered with a white sheet, the blankets folded up and lying with the pillows underneath the covering in the middle of the mattress. Mr. Farley glanced carefully at the wash-stand—no, the jug was quite dry; there was no soap in the soap-dish, no towel on the horse. He began to think Ralph had not been there—evidently he had not slept in his own room if he had been.

‘You were at Miss Leonard's last evening, your little servant said.’ Mr. Farley spoke in an off-hand tone. ‘What a pretty place Mote Court is!’

‘Yes,’ answered Molly, ‘very pretty.’

‘It must have been rather a lonely walk home for you,’ went on Mr. Farley, gazing

out of the staircase window, 'but perhaps Miss Leonard sent you home in the carriage.'

'Oh! no, but Mr. Johnson was dining there also, and Mr. Driver, and I walked home with them.'

'And that was about what time?'

'It must have been past ten before we reached here, for we heard the church-clock strike when we were on the bridge.'

'Now, Miss Scobell,' said Mr. Farley, turning round and looking straight at her, 'answer me one question, and I will go and not trouble you any more. Did you see your brother yesterday as you came from Miss Leonard's?'

'No,' said Molly, quietly. 'I did not!'

'You did not see him yesterday at all?'

'No,' answered Molly, briefly.

It was perfectly true, and yet Molly felt as if she were telling a downright lie. She had not seen Ralph yesterday, for it had been past one o'clock in the morning ere the signal had come to her window. But yet, to all intents, it was a deceit, a subterfuge, a paltry quibble. Farley looked at her dubiously. Was she telling him a lie? He could not be sure. Probably she had seen her brother, probably knew where he was, probably might try to see him again. At any rate he could make sure of that. He would have the house narrowly watched, so that not a mouse should stir out of it without his knowledge, and without being followed. He wanted to ascertain if Ralph had come for money, and if he had obtained it, or whether he was still hanging about wait-

ing. It was quite possible Mrs. Scobell had none in the house and would have to procure it, and who so likely to supply it as Miss Leonard, and Ralph would wait till he got it. Molly would probably go or send to Mote Court, and then find her brother. He saw it was little use asking questions. Molly was on her guard, and was quite quick-witted enough to fence with him.

‘Thank you,’ he said, as he went downstairs, ‘I am very sorry to have troubled you, such old neighbours, and a lady I so much respect. But you see I must do my duty. My dear young lady, if I might offer a little advice it is this—that if you should see your brother, to tell him it would be best for him not to attempt escape. He can’t evade the law. Better

face it like a man and take his punishment, and begin again straight and square. He will only aggravate and lengthen the trouble by trying to dodge. It is utterly impossible for him to get away, utterly impossible.'

A flash of light came into Molly's eyes.

'Thank you, Mr. Farley,' she said. 'If I see Ralph I will remember to tell him what you say.'

Mr. Farley looked at her curiously for a moment. Then in his heart he believed that Ralph was really off. The flash of mingled amusement, indignation, and bitterness in the girl's eyes, he took for a flash of triumph at some fancied successful escape.

'The scamp is off,' he muttered to himself, as he walked down the street, medita-

tively swinging his cane. 'When did the girl see him, I wonder? I have had the house watched all night. But she is a trump, and no mistake. Pity she wasn't the boy. There would have been none of this trouble then. Thank heaven! I have no sons. They are the worst affliction that can befall a man, and yet poor Bessie is always bemoaning herself that our two are only girls. Girls are a handful sometimes, sure enough, but not so bad as sons—at least only *sometimes*, while the boys are *always* a trouble.'

Meanwhile Molly had run up to her mother's room. The poor lady was lying back on her pillows trembling and faint. As the girl came into the room, Mrs. Scobell stretched out her small thin, shaking hands.

‘ Oh ! Molly,’ she gasped. ‘ He has been upstairs : I heard him.’

‘ All right, mother darling.’

Molly came to the bedside and put her strong young arms round the frail trembling figure, and pressed it to her warm firm breast. As she felt the quivering sobbing, that half convulsed her mother’s frame, a fierce, bitter pang passed through her heart against her brother. He who ought to have been the stay and comfort of the widow, was really killing her. Yes, that tumultuous, irregular beating of her mother’s heart was, in Molly’s eyes, the worst of her brother’s crimes.

‘ All right, mother darling !’ she repeated, kissing the soft thin cheek. ‘ Don’t you fret so. It is all right. He has gone away not a bit wiser than he came, and I

haven't had to tell a very big lie. No, in strictness not a lie at all. But never mind that. I'll tell any number of crams, if only you will be quiet and get well. Oh! Ralph will get away safely, I expect—and perhaps abroad he may do better.'

'No!' sighed the poor lady. 'No, Molly, he will never do better. He is like his poor father—it isn't all his fault, Molly, he was born so. Oh! dear, oh! dear—and such a beautiful baby as he was, and could walk and talk when he was only fifteen months old. You were much slower, Molly, but there—it was born in him, poor, poor Ralph. The sins of the fathers—yes, that is what the Bible says, Molly—and it is true—the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. Oh! child, child,

when you marry, be sure he's a teetotaler !'

'But, mother,' cried Molly, laughing at this climax, spite of the tears that would come, and the trouble in her heart, 'I don't think I care for teetotalers much. No. I know a better way still. I never, never, never mean to get married at all, but always stay and take care of my little mother. But now you lie still for a bit, and try to have a nap. I am going to get the money out of Mr. Johnson before he goes to church.'

Mr. Johnson was sitting in his easy-chair by the window, reading, when Molly entered the room. He put down his book and rose quickly with a pleased look when he saw who his visitor was, and came forward to shake hands.

‘I hope your mother is better?’ he said, as he put a chair for Molly, and returned to his seat.

‘She is not very well this morning,’ said Molly; and then she paused, for a queer feeling came upon her as she thought of the task she had set herself. A great lump seemed to rise in her throat, and a sort of weight lay upon her breast, and she felt as if she could hardly speak. A mist came before her eyes, and she saw Mr. Johnson’s face as if it were a long way off, and there was a sound in her ears as of the tolling of bells and the falling of waters.

‘I am going to faint,’ she thought, and then instantly—‘I won’t—I must not—I will not.’ She jumped up off her chair and grasped the table.

‘ Oh ! Mr. Johnson,’ she gasped, and then she stopped with a sudden burst of tears that relieved her.

‘ What is the matter ?’ he cried, springing up in his turn, and looking with concern and dismay at his visitor’s emotion.

‘ Oh ! I beg your pardon,’ she answered, wiping away her tears. ‘ I am so sorry to be so silly, but—but we are in a great deal of trouble.’

‘ I am very sorry to hear it,’ he said, gravely and kindly. ‘ Can I help you or be of any use ? You know I will do anything I can !’

‘ Yes,’ said Molly, frankly. ‘ It is just that ! You have been so kind that it has made me bold to ask your help. The fact is—things have occurred,’ here she hesitated a minute—‘ a great trouble has come

upon us—and—and—' here again she stopped, and putting her hand in her pocket pulled out a thin yellow-covered book. 'I have twenty pounds in the Post Office Savings Bank,' she continued, opening it and putting it into Mr. Johnson's hands, 'and I want the money badly to-day, but you know I can't get it till Wednesday, even if I write the first thing to-morrow morning, and I can't get the form till then. And—and—I came to ask you if you would lend me the money till Wednesday. I know it must seem a dreadfully bold thing to ask—but you see the money is there, and I will pay you back as soon as the Post Office people give it me.'

Mr. Johnson looked at the book in his hands, and something in it, or in the pale,

imploring face before him, made his own eyes grow dim. The entries in the book before him extended over several years, and in themselves told a tale of careful saving and self-denial which he understood well enough. He had been poor himself, and once such a book had been his only wealth. Two shillings—five shillings—ten shillings once or twice—such were the entries from time to time at varying intervals. What a record of care and forethought and small self-denials, what small, girlish sacrifices did they not chronicle! Once five pounds had been drawn out, and evidently there had been great anxiety to make up the sum. Mr. Johnson did not know that that five pounds had been expended in a good suit of clothes for Ralph when he went to London

to make his new start there. And now all was to be drawn out—for what? Mr. Johnson did not know, but he could guess. That ne'er-do-well son, of whom he had heard was in some scrape, he felt sure, and this poor girl's hardly-earned and carefully-hoarded shillings were wanted to help him out of it.

Molly's eyes had been fixed upon him all the time he was looking at her book, and, as he delayed his answer, her heart sank in her bosom. She had not contemplated any refusal from him, and she scarcely knew how to face the thought. Surely to this wealthy man—and she knew from what Miss Leonard had told her that he was wealthy, and held also to be extremely generous with his money—to lend twenty pounds for three days could not

be much. She was not asking him for a loan with only some uncertain and distant idea of paying it back. He would only have to trust her till Wednesday.

‘I would pay you back faithfully on Wednesday,’ she said, timidly, ‘if you would be so very, very kind as to lend it me till then. I know it must seem very dreadful and horrid of me to ask it—but you have been so kind, and it is such a sudden and heavy trouble ;’ and here poor Molly, to her dismay, broke down again into tears.

‘My dear, my dear,’ said Mr. Johnson, in a husky voice, while he hurriedly took out some folded notes from his pocket-book, ‘it wasn’t that. Take as much as you like ;’ and he pushed the notes into Molly’s hand, ‘and pay me back any time

that is convenient. I was only thinking—cannot I help you in some other way? Can you—will you trust me with your trouble, and see if I cannot find some way out of it for you?’

Molly looked at the notes. There were ten five-pound notes. She took out four, and put back the others into Mr. Johnson’s hand with a look so sweet and grateful that, old man as he was, a sudden thrill ran through him.

‘I would tell you all about it,’ she said, in a low voice, glancing round at the open window, ‘at once, and only too gladly ask your advice and help; but just now I think it is better—better for all—that you should not know. It is a dreadful trouble—and—disgrace.’ Here Molly stopped a moment; but then went on, ‘Mr. Farley,

the inspector of police, has been here, asking questions. I daresay he will ask you some if he gets the opportunity; but if you do not know anything about it he cannot worry you. But if all go right, I will tell you on Wednesday, and if not—why, all the world will know then, and there will be no need of telling. Only there is one thing I do ask you. If Mr. Farley does say anything to you, do you mind not telling him that you have lent me this money?’

‘He shall never learn it from me!’

‘Then I can only thank you a thousand times,’ said Molly, gratefully, holding his hand between both hers. She would have liked to kiss it, only she was afraid that the old gentleman might not approve of such a demonstration. She could only

look at him with gratitude shining in her eyes, and try falteringly to express in words that which she was saying much more eloquently by her glance. 'I did not know,' she went on, 'that there were such kind people in the world.'

'Not Miss Leonard?' he said, smiling.

'Dear Miss Leonard! Oh! yes; but then she is such an old friend, and has known and loved mother all her life. But she would not have done what you have,' Molly went on, naïvely, 'because she would have insisted on knowing why I wanted the money so badly, and when I had told her she would not have lent it to me.'

Mr. Johnson looked amused.

'I am afraid,' he said, 'that you convict me of indiscretion by that speech.'

‘Oh ! but you won’t want it back again,’ cried Molly, a little frightened, and holding her notes tightly.

‘No, no. I trust to you. But stay, there is one thing. Would you not like some gold or silver for one of those notes?’

‘Oh ! yes. I would indeed!’

This arrangement being settled, Molly went away, after trying again to express her gratitude, but to her mind quite failing therein. But to Mr. Johnson, the tender, half-surprised, grateful look on the pale, pretty face was quite payment enough. He sat a little while thinking over the circumstances as far as he knew them, till he heard the church bells clash out from the grey old tower, and knew it was time to brush his hat, put on his gloves, and

betake himself to morning service. There he saw Maurice Driver, who joined him as they came out. The young fellow was eagerly looking about him, and at last, in rather a disappointed tone, said,

‘Doesn’t Miss Scobell come to church?’

‘Her mother is not well,’ said Mr. Johnson. ‘I daresay she did not like to leave her.’

But he glanced at Maurice a little earnestly. A new idea occurred to him. Was this young fellow falling in love with Molly—his Molly, as he was beginning to think of her? A faint jealous pang shot through him. Ah! if he were only Maurice’s age, what possibilities there might be before him! But then he laughed inwardly at his elderly folly, as he termed it, and looked again at Maurice

as though to see if he were worthy the treasure.

Mr. Johnson's dinner that day was most exquisitely cooked, and he enjoyed it very much. When the little maid was clearing away the dishes he spoke to her.

'Patty,' he said, 'I think you are a genius.'

'Law, sir,' said Patty, stopping in her operation of sweeping up the crumbs, 'a genus—what's that?'

'A genius, Patty—not a genus, which is quite a different thing! A genius means a person who is very clever and much superior to other folks. One person has a genius for music, another for painting. Now you have a genius for cookery. My dinner has been perfect.'

'Law!' said Patty again. 'Law, you

don't think as it was *me* as cooked your dinner, do you, sir ?'

'Well, yes—I did imagine so,' answered Mr. Johnson.

'*Me!*' exclaimed Patty. 'Why, Miss Molly wouldn't let me touch it. She did it every bit herself. She 'ud hardly let me wash the taters, 'cause she said you was the dearest, goodest old gentleman that ever she seed.'

Old gentleman ! Yes, that was of course how she thought of him. And he was old—or what must seem old in a young girl's eyes. He smiled to himself again at his folly.

'She thinks such a heap of you,' continued Patty, confidentially. 'Why, there now, this very morning, there was your boots. I'd made 'em look nice—yes, that

I had, real nice ; but she said they wasn't bright enough, and she goes and shines 'em up herself, and when Miss Molly does a thing, she does it prime—that she does. And here's some strawberries, sir, as she got for you out of the garden ;' and Patty put on the table a little dish, with each crimson berry peeping out of a fresh green leaf, and a half-blown moss rosebud lying by across them.

Presently Mr. Johnson went out for a stroll down the river. As he stood on the bridge looking meditatively down at the swirl and flow of the little river, Mr. Farley, with whom he had formed a slight acquaintance at the hotel, came carelessly strolling along, and stopped to speak to him. The inspector adroitly led the conversation up to Mr. Johnson's landlady,

but gained little information in return for his seemingly indifferent questions; but on his side Mr. Johnson managed to extract a good deal from Mr. Farley, and when they parted, and he returned slowly to his lodgings, he had guessed pretty accurately why Molly had borrowed that money from him.

CHAPTER VII.

‘PATTY,’ said Molly, a little later on that afternoon, when her little maid returned from Sunday school and afternoon church, ‘presently I want to go up to Mote Court.’

‘Yes, miss,’ said Patty.

‘You will take care of mother, Patty, and, if I am not back quite by supper-time, you will take her her arrowroot—you know how to make it.’

‘Law, miss, yes! I’ll make it exactly

as you do. I'll take care of missus, but what's Mr. Johnson to have ?'

'He is going to Dr. Holford's to supper. You needn't trouble about him.'

'All right, miss !'

But Molly did not move away. She stood looking out of the kitchen window with rather absent eyes at the border of stocks and pinks that were now giving out their sweetness to the early evening air. Beyond them was the dappled green of the grass-plot, and then a hedge of sweetbriar that acted as a screen to the bit of vegetable garden, and then, last of all, a tall straggling hedge which divided the premises from a broad meadow, across which ran a little-used footpath, leading to a narrow, tree-bordered lane sloping steeply

down to where a rickety wooden bridge crossed the river.

‘Patty,’ said Molly, again.

‘Yes, miss?’ replied the attentive Patty.

‘There has been a young fellow wandering up and down the street all day. Have you noticed him?’

‘That’s Jem Mace, miss!’

‘You know him, then?’

‘Bless you, miss, yes! I went to school along with him. Jem has always been a friend of mine.’

‘What is he doing up and down like that, Patty?’

Patty screwed up her face to an expression which she thought suited the situation. In reality she was boiling over with excitement and interest. It was like

really living through one of those delightful penny stories of which she had devoured so many whenever her finances had allowed of their purchase. She was sincerely attached to her young mistress, and really sorry for her anxiety and grief; but still the sensation of there being a mystery in the house; that the place was watched and guarded; that spies had to be hoodwinked, and watchers evaded, and that she had her part to play in the drama, was delicious to her young and romantic soul. So she screwed up her rosy face, and made her round eyes into perfect circles of intelligent mystery, and said, in a hollow whisper, looking round to see that no one had suddenly and unexpectedly appeared out of the coal-cellar or up from the larder,

‘He’s a-watchin’ to see if Mr. Ralph comes! Mr. Farley’s set him on.’

‘How do you know that, Patty? Has he told you?’

‘Yes, miss. I just had a chat with him this afternoon. Law, miss, don’t you look so frightened. I won’t let on about anything.’

Molly stood silent again. She had been thinking how far it would be safe to trust Patty, but now it was abundantly clear that not much choice lay in her power. It was evident that Patty guessed or knew the whole truth. She must take the girl into close alliance, and she felt she could trust her. So she turned round and went to where the girl stood by the kitchen fire watching if the kettle boiled, and took her rough, red hands in hers, and looked

straight into the round, honest grey eyes.

‘Patty,’ she said, ‘Patty, you know what great trouble and distress we are in. Will you be true to me and help me, Patty?’

The girl’s round, rosy face crumpled up into the oddest curves as the tears sprang into her eyes.

‘Law, miss!’ she said, with a choke and a sob. ‘Law, miss, they might cut me up into little pieces before they should get a word out o’ me! Why, of course I know Mr. Ralph’s been here—by the bread, and the meat, and the blacking on the brush, and his dirty collar in the basket; but do you think I’d tell? No, not if they frizzled me up like the poor gentleman in the book, as they put on the gridiron, and he

asking them to turn him 'cause he was done one side. Law, I allers think of him when I'm cooking mutton chops, poor thing !'

Molly was crying a little herself, but she could not help laughing too, at the result of Patty's study of a copy of Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs,' that stood on the parlour shelves.

'Well, Patty,' she said, giving the girl a hug and a kiss, 'I don't think they will want to hurt you, but I do want your help. I don't want Jem Mace to know that I go out this evening. Now, do you think——?' here Molly paused, and looked enquiringly at Patty.

'All right, miss,' said Patty, with a very knowing little wink. 'You tell me a min-

ute or two before you go, and I'll see after Jem. But you had best get through the hedge, miss. There's a tolerable biggish hole just by the old elder-tree at the corner. I was going to fix it up with some bits of wood, 'cause I thought the boys would be in after the strawberries if they found it out, but I'm glad I didn't now.'

'Yes,' said Molly, 'that will be best if you think you can just keep Jem at the front for a minute or two. I shall not go till it begins to get dusk, Patty, so as to meet fewer people on the way.'

What an impossible thing it is to reckon with human nature ! It is like working a sum into which all sorts of unknown factors are perpetually intruding. Mr. Farley considered Jem Mace as his most promis-

ing young disciple in the art of detective-ship—a keen, clever, 'cute chap, he was wont to say, and especially useful in Bem-bury on account of his perfect acquaintance with both the townspeople and the country-folk round, their family connections, relations, friendships, businesses, feuds and love affairs. Mr. Farley, with his deep knowledge of human nature, might have guessed, and probably did guess, that Jem had a weak spot in his heart and moral constitution, but he never imagined that putting him to watch Mrs. Scobell's house was a post which would immediately call Jem's emotional nature into play, and develop the frailty which lay insidiously hidden therein. How was Mr. Farley to know that Jem Mace, and Mrs. Scobell's maid Patty, had been young

lovers and companions in the days when blackberries and hazel-nuts are dear to the soul, and that the honest fellow had never shaken off the maiden's thrall! Alas! no one can be quite omniscient, or suspect all the tricks that Fate and Chance play us.

As to Molly herself, she was quite demoralized. She at once grasped the advantage which this young flirtation put into her hands, and did not feel the slightest scruple at using it for her own ends. Woman is so short of weapons with which to combat with man that, when she is desperate, she seizes upon the few she has and wields them as best she may. Besides, all that Patty would do would be to have a chat with Jem at the side gate, as—if the truth were to be told—she had

done a dozen times before, only now it would be with her young mistress's sanction. So, having settled this, the two conspirators parted. Molly to take her mother a cup of tea, and Patty to sit down and mature her plans.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

